

**A Grit's Triumph**  
**Essays on the Works of Harry Crews**

**Edited by**  
**David K. Jeffrey**

**National University Publications**  
**ASSOCIATED FACULTY PRESS, INC.**  
**Port Washington, N.Y. // 1983**

**Associated Faculty Press, Inc.**  
**National University Publications**

### *Advisory Editor*

Copyright © 1983 by Associated Faculty Press, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

**Manufactured in the United States of America**

Published by  
Associated Faculty Press, Inc.  
Port Washington, N.Y.

## Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

### A Grit's Triumph.

(National university publications)

Includes index.

|  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| 1. Crews, Harry, 1935-                                   | -Criticism and interpretation- |
| Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Jeffrey, David K., 1942- |                                |
| PS3552.R46Z68 1983                                       | 813'.54 83-11849               |
| ISBN 0-8046-9327-7                                       |                                |

1. Crews, Harry, 1935-

—Criticism and interpretation—

Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Jeffrey, David K., 1942-

PS3552.R46Z68

1983

813.54

83-11849

ISBN 0-8046-9327-7

## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1. Harry Crews Introduces Himself. . . . .   | 7   |
| Donald R. Noble  |     |
| 2. Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection . . . . .  | 21  |
| Frank W. Shelton   |     |
| 3. Postmodern Georgia Scenes: Harry Crews and<br>the Southern Tradition in Fiction . . . . . | 33  |
| William M. Moss  |     |
| 4. The Land and the Ethnics in Crews's Works . . . . .                                       | 46  |
| Jack Moore   |     |
| 5. Crews's Freaks . . . . .  | 67  |
| David K. Jeffrey   |     |
| 6. Harry Crews and the Southern Protestant Church . . . . .                                  | 79  |
| Ruth L. Brittin  |     |
| 7. The Athlete's Hand Filling Up: Harry Crews and Sports . . . . .                           | 100 |
| Donald Jonhson   |     |
| 8. Crews's Women. . . . .  | 112 |
| Patricia V. Beatty   |     |
| 9. Theme and Technique in Harry Crews's <i>Car</i> . . . . .                                 | 124 |
| Frank W. Shelton   |     |
| 10. The Other End of Love: Harry Crews's <i>Car</i> . . . . .                                | 132 |
| Larry Vonalt   |     |
| 11. Harry Crews: An Interview . . . . .  | 140 |
| David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble   |     |
| NOTES . . . . .  | 152 |
| INDEX . . . . .  | 160 |

Titles of Crews's books are abbreviated as follows in text citations:

- AC — *A Childhood*
- BG — *Blood and Grits*
- C — *Car*
- FS — *A Feast of Snakes*
- GS — *The Gospel Singer*
- GC — *The Gypsy's Curse*
- HID — *The Hawk Is Dying*
- KTS — *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*
- NGH — *Naked in Garden Hills*
- TT — *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven*

## PREFACE

The essays in this volume represent the first full-length study of the works of Harry Crews, a fact at once disturbing and hard to explain, since Crews is a serious writer with several exceptional works which have won high praise from reviewers. However, academic critics have discovered Crews only recently. The essays herein, all but two of them previously unpublished, chart the process of their discovery.

Crews is in many ways a quintessentially "Southern" writer, and several of the essayists explore aspects of his works which are characteristically Southern: his concern for and growth out of a particular tradition and a particular environment; his thematic use of ethnics and grotesques; and his fascination with the effects of a Southern Protestant upbringing. Yet Crews is no mere regionalist, and the other essayists explore Crews's writings on topics not commonly associated with the "Southern" school alone—social satire, sports, cars, and women. The volume opens with an introduction based on Crews's statements in his non-fiction about his own life and ideas; it concludes with a recent interview. The volume also includes Frank Shelton's thoughtful overview of Crews's work.

Inevitably, since the contributors were working separately, some of these essays overlap on occasion. Rather than excise such repetitions and risk destroying the thread of the contributor's argument, I let a few such repetitions stand, believing them in any case a positive sign; that separate critics arrive at similar insights suggests to me the validity of their views. That the volume includes two essays on *Car* may puzzle some readers, and to them, I offer the following explanation. The two essays interested me not only because they are good ones, but also because they take very different approaches to the novel, one which is not generally evaluated herein and one which, I must confess, is not my favorite in Crews's canon. That two critics liked the novel enough to write essays about it seemed to me evidence, if not of the failure of my own critical intelligence, then at least of the fact that the place and value of Crews's works is by no means a settled question. My hope and the hope of all the contributors is that our essays will spark interest in and debate about Crews's works, which we believe those works deserve.

In preparing this volume I have been aided by many people. I would like to thank Pat Waters for introducing me to Crews's work in the first place, way back when we were young; Don Noble, Bill Moss, and Don Johnson, who wrote early versions of these essays for delivery at a conference in 1980; the other contributors for their confidence and their patience; and Jackie McGinty for her typing. For the help and encouragement of my wife, Martha Langley, thanks is not enough, but I offer it.

This book is for my parents, for Roberta, and for the memory of Bob Scott.

David K. Jeffrey

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

PATRICIA V. BEATTY is Assistant Professor of English at Livingston University. She has published articles on John Fowles in *Ariel* and *South Atlantic Quarterly* and an article on Crews's *The Gypsy's Curse* in *Critique* (Winter, 1981-82).

RUTH L. BRITTIN is Associate Professor of English at Auburn University. She is co-editor of *A Writing Apprenticeship* and author of essays on Reginald Claude Gentry and Samuel W. Allen for *Lives of Mississippi Authors, 1817-1967* and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

DAVID K. JEFFREY is Professor and Head of the Department of English at Northeast Louisiana University. He has published essays in such journals as *Modern Drama*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, and *Studies in Narrative Technique*.

DONALD JOHNSON is Chairman of the Department of English at Bridgewater State College. He has published essays in such journals as *Modern Language Studies*, *Restoration*, *Poet Lore*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. His poetry has appeared in *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Beloit Poetry Journal*.

JACK B. MOORE is Professor and Chairman of the American Studies Department at the University of South Florida. He has published books on Maxwell Bodenheim, W.E.B. DuBois, and realism. His fiction has appeared in *Esquire*, *Kansas Quarterly*, and *New Mexico Quarterly*.

WILLIAM M. MOSS is Associate Professor of English at Wake Forest University. His essays and reviews have appeared in *Mississippi Quarterly*, *New England Quarterly*, *Southern Literary Journal*, and *Southern Humanities Review*.

DONALD R. NOBEL is Associate Professor of English at the University of Alabama. He has edited three books, the most recent a volume of essays on Ernest Hemingway, and has published articles in *Horizon*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, and *The New York Times*, among other places.

FRANK W. SHELTON is Professor of English at Limestone College. He has published essays in such journals as *Critique*, *Southern Review*, *Southern Literary Journal*, and *Southern Humanities Review*.

LARRY VONALT is Associate Professor of English at the University of Missouri in Rolla. He has published articles in *The Sewanee Review*, *John Berryman Studies*, *Critique*, *The Ozark Review*, and *The Malahat Review*.

## 1. Harry Crews Introduces Himself

Donald R. Noble

Harry Crews has written a good deal of nonfiction over the past ten years, articles about other people—Charles Bronson or Robert Blake, for example—and columns for *Esquire* on a variety of subjects—sports and spectacles like drag racing, dog fighting, cock fighting, and carnivals. And, in pieces like “Why I Live Where I Live”<sup>1</sup> and most extensively, explicitly, and beautifully in *A Childhood: the biography of a place*,<sup>2</sup> he has written about his own life. No matter what Crews is writing *about* in his nonfiction, he is always writing about himself. He either creeps or leaps into just about every piece he writes. What follows is an introduction to the life and works of Harry Crews using only the information about himself that Crews has dropped, revealed, confessed, or crowed about in his three volumes of nonfiction. He has said in an interview, “It has almost become a crime in this country to be vulnerable, and that’s what I want to be. I want to be naked.”<sup>3</sup> Insofar as Crews is “naked” in the following pages, he will have taken his clothes off himself.

To the delight and gratitude of Crews fans everywhere, Crews has himself written eloquently about his earliest years. *A Childhood: the biography of a place* will, if justice is served, take its rightful place on shelves next to works like Franklin’s *Autobiography* and *The Education of Henry Adams*. It is a beautifully written memoir, a record of a particular kind of American life, a kind which, perhaps fortunately, is disappearing as rural areas like Bacon County, Georgia, are electrified, its roads paved, and its population brought, for better or worse, into the twentieth century. In this sense, Crews is a kind of curator of the memory of his own place; he has done in *A Childhood* something akin to what Isaac Bashevis Singer has done for the *shtetl* life of eastern Europe. He has created a portrait of a way of life that is disappearing.

And what a way it is (or was)—violent, crude, improverished, largely illiterate, hard. As Crews begins by telling us, he was fortunate to be conceived at all since his father has lost one testicle as a result of gonorrhea contracted from an Indian girl in the swamps while working to build the Tamiami Trail, the first real highway

built across the Everglades, in 1925. But Ray Crews, six foot two, 170 pounds, survived his stint in the Everglades and returned to Georgia. Crews looks at a snapshot of his father and sees a hard-drinking ladies' man, "a man of endless and exuberant energy, a man who believes in his bones that anything worth doing is worth overdoing" (AC, pp. 56). Ray Crews will court and marry in November of 1928 Myrtice Hazelton, sixteen when he is twenty-three, and then settle down to a bone-crushing life as a sharecropper, a life that would last only until April 17 of 1937, when Harry Crews's father died of overwork and the impossible strain on a congenitally bad heart.

More chilling, however, than the death itself is what happens immediately afterwards.

The night after the day daddy was buried, somebody went into the smoke-house and stole all the meat that had been cured and hung there before he died. . . . Mama knows who got the meat, not because she has any hard proof, but because in her heart she knows, and I know too, but the one who got it is himself lying in the same graveyard daddy's in and I see no reason to name him.

He was one of my daddy's friends. I do not say he was *supposedly* or *apparently* a friend. He *was* a friend, and a close one, but he stole the meat anyway. Not many people may be able to understand that or sympathize with it, but I think I do. It was a hard time in that land, and a lot of men did things for which they were ashamed and suffered for the rest of their lives. But they did them because of hunger and sickness and because they could not bear the sorry spectacle of their children dying from lack of a doctor and their wives growing old before they were thirty. (AC, pp. 42-43)

Without question, times were hard; there was poverty and hunger and disease, and almost all the people, it seems, lived close to the line. "Survival was a day-to-day crisis," Crews says, "as real as rickets in the bones of their children or the worms that would rise out of their children's stomachs and nest in their throats so that they had to be pulled out by hand to keep the children from choking" (AC, p. 9). Or, in another place: "The world that circumscribed the people I come from had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it. It was a world in which survival depended on raw courage, a courage born out of desperation and sustained by a lack of alternatives" (AC, p. 40). It was a world, as Crews describes it, in which folks could have used some good luck; but, as readers of Crews's novels have noticed, good luck or "wishing" is something only a fool would count on. "Wish in one hand and shit in the other. See which one fills up first," Crews's exasperated Mama tells him at one particularly awful time (AC, p. 126). Luck was in dramatically short supply.

Early in his childhood, at about two years, earlier than he could have consciously remembered, while his father was still alive, there occurred an event so unlucky, so pathetic, that it would have permanently altered anyone's attitude



toward luck. His parents had worked hard and at last owned two yearling cows. One hot summer day his mother was scrubbing the floors with homemade lye and looked out to see their cows about to drink from a barrel of lead poisoning Ray Crews was using to spray tobacco for cutworms. Mrs. Crews dropped her work and ran to stop the cows from drinking. Halfway to the field, Crews writes, "she heard me scream and knew immediately what had happened. . . . I was sitting on the floor screaming, holding a lump of raw lye in each hand, and worse, I had put some of it in my mouth. Blood was running from my lips and tongue." Crews's parents raced him to the doctor's. "It turned out not to be as bad as it looked. I had not swallowed any of the lye, and the burns in my mouth and on my hands were not serious. When they got back home, the yearling cows were dead, lying already stiff by the barrel of lead poisoning. Daddy strapped the sprayer on and went back to work in the tobacco" (AC, pp. 39-40).

If Crew's burns were not to be serious in the lye incident, in another incredible scene at hog-killing time they were more than serious. Crews was transcendently burned when he was popped by other children off the end of a pop-the-whip, and flew through the air into a "steaming boiler of water beside a scalded, floating hog" (AC, p. 112). He was pulled out at once, and then, with all his family and friends staring at him, "I reached over and touched my right hand with my left and the whole thing came off like a wet glove. I mean, the skin on the top of the wrist and the back of my hand, along with the fingernails, all just turned loose and slid on down to the ground. I could see my fingernails lying in the little puddle my flesh made on the ground in front of me" (AC, p. 113).

Crews recovered, but it took some time and considerable anguish. He is not one ignorant of pain and, like many who really know it, tends to pay it as little attention as possible. It is a "given" in this world. There are worse things than simple, physical pain, and Crews was to know some of them as a child too. On the night of August 7, 1940, exactly three months after his fifth birthday, Crews had the first real illness of his life. That night he developed a raging fever, and when he woke he was in pain with his legs drawn "as tight as they were going to get—as tight as they *could* get, with the heels pulled all the way up until they touched the backs of my thighs" (AC, p. 77). The local doctors were never certain whether Crews was suffering from a kind of infantile paralysis or a hysterical illness or something utterly unknown. "I was in the bed for six weeks with my legs drawn up, and I never expect to spend a longer six weeks in my life" (AC, p. 91). It was a horrible time for Crews, painful and frightening. It was not known if he would ever recover, or ever walk again.

Worse than that, people began to show up at his bedside, even "total strangers from other counties, all of them come to stare at me where I lay in a high fever and filled with the most awful cramps, come to stare at my rigid legs. I knew that they were staring with unseemly intensity at my legs, that they wanted most of all to touch them, and I hated it and dreaded it and was humiliated by it. I felt how lonely and savage it was to be a freak" (AC, pp. 78-79). "Right there, as a child, I got to the bottom of what it means to be lost, what it means to be rejected by everybody (if they had not rejected me, why was I smothered in shame every time

they looked at me?) and everything you ever thought would save you" (*AC*, p. 83). Many times during his writing career Crews writes of freaks, of their painful vulnerability, their inability to hide their deformities from the world. His empathy is not abstract; it is earned.

The incidents above are among the most sensational of Crew's childhood, but day-to-day life, without scalding or paralysis, was difficult enough. Eight months after his father's death his mother married her brother-in-law, Pascal, the man whom Crews would know as his father, not realizing for years that Pascal was his uncle and his stepfather. Pascal tried his best, but drink, frustration, and violence finally ruined the marriage between him and Myrtice, and she left for Jacksonville, Florida, where Bacon County people went for jobs in the cigar factories. Crews was partly raised in Jacksonville, but still among homefolks. There is very little city kid in Crews.

Crew's early years, as readers realize bit by bit, provided him with an enormous fund of material. His black childhood friends and neighbors Willalee Bookatee and his father serve loosely as models for black characters, as does Willalee's grandmother, who loves to tell stories about snakes and claims she was "jest walking along and this snake I seen in the ditch had a white man's head. It was the marsah's head on the snake in the ditch" (*AC*, p. 84). The everyday life of plowing, tending, harvesting, drinking, fighting, and the sex lives of the people and animals around him provided Crews with much to write about.

The question Crews readers are most likely to ask is from where the impetus to write might come in an environment so unbookish, so intellectually and culturally sparse. Walker Percy, raised in Birmingham and at his patrician cousin's place in Greenville, Mississippi, may tell interviewers that for him the storytelling, front-porch South is dead and gone. This is not the case for Harry Crews. Coming from an essentially illiterate environment, he found that the oral tradition was *the* method of preservation. "Nothing is allowed to die in a society of storytelling people. It is all—the good and the bad—carted up and brought along from one generation to the next. And everything that is brought along is colored and shaped by those who bring it" (*AC*, p. 4).

While Crews was recovering from his paralysis, during those six long winter weeks, "one of my favorite places to be was in the corner of the room where the ladies were quilting. God, I loved the click of needles on thimbles, a sound that will always make me think of stories. When I was a boy, stories were conversation and conversation was stories. For me it was a time of magic" (*AC*, p. 93).

Also magic for the children of these poor sharecroppers was one of the only pieces of printed matter, one of the only books, perhaps, beside the Bible, to be found in every shack: the Sears, Roebuck catalogue.

In the minds of most people, the Sears, Roebuck catalogue is a kind of low joke associated with outhouses. God knows the catalogue sometimes ended up in the outhouse, but more often it did not. All the farmers, black and white, kept dried corncobs beside their double-seated thrones, and the cobs served the purpose for which they were put there with all possible efficiency and comfort. (*AC*, pp. 53-54)

Most people were too poor to order anything from it; they would, however, "at their leisure spend hours dreaming over" the book.

Willalee Bookatee and I used it for another reason. We made up stories out of it, used it to spread a web of fantasy about us. Without that catalogue our childhood would have been radically different. The federal government ought to strike a medal for the Sears, Roebuck Company for . . . bringing all that color and all that mystery and all that beauty into the lives of country people. I first became fascinated with the Sears catalogue because all the people in its pages were perfect. Nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half-chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence stable. And if they didn't have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire, or knives, or fish-hooks. But the people in the catalogue had no such hurts. They were not only whole, had all their arms and legs and toes and eyes on their unscarred bodies, but they were also beautiful. (AC, p. 54)

They also looked happy, but Crews and Willalee knew, even as children, that looks are deceiving and that, because they assumed that the people in the Wish Book knew and were related to one another, there had to be trouble, even in the Sears, Roebuck paradise. They invented love affairs, marriages, adulteries, all kinds of intrigues among the Sears people.

Making up stories, it seems to me now [Crews writes], was not only a way for us to understand the way we lived but also a defense against it. It was no doubt the first step in a life devoted primarily to man and women and children who never lived anywhere but in my imagination. I have found in them infinitely more order and beauty and satisfaction than I ever have in the people who moved about me in the real world. (AC, p. 57)

Crews may be in large part devoted to those who live only in his imagination, but he is fascinated by the live people around him as well. This natural curiosity, one of his virtues as a journalist, makes it impossible for him not to be. In "Carny" he is enthralled by the carnival crowd. "My fix is other people's lives," he tells us.<sup>4</sup> At another time he is covering the "Gatornationals," a Hot Rod Association drag race, when he sees a couple who capture him. She was "wearing denim short shorts and over-the-calf black boots and a red halter, her hair impossibly hived high on her head even though she had just taken off a helmet emblazoned with tongues of fire." And he, "a good ole boy with the proud belly and decorated arms. . . an unfiltered cigarette, a sour expression coming into his face as he squinted malevolently out over the campgrounds." "I moved up close now," Crews says, "because when I see something like that I can't get enough of looking."<sup>5</sup>

The catalyst for Crews's creativity, then, is these pictures without text which spurred his imagination. One is reminded of the controversy between those who prefer illustrated novels and those who do not want to have some artist's

conception forced upon them. The latter preference shows up when we go to a movie based on a book we have read. Usually we insist that *that* is not what Jay Gatsby or Jason Compson really looks like at all.

Years later, in another time and another place, Crews will be perusing a different catalogue in Freeport, Maine, in 1975. The catalogue, of course, is L. L. Bean's, and Crews urges that it too get a medal from the federal government. "Men all over the world who will never get any closer to the outdoors than running over an occasional squirrel with their cars can sit bemused and dreaming on long winter nights."<sup>6</sup> Could it be that Crews is saying that the average American suburban male is standing in as much need of inspiration and fantasy and that his environment is as devoid of creativity as Willalee's and Harry's as they sat on the floor of the cropper's shack in Bacon County, Georgia? Probably, yes.

In 1953 Harry Crews became the first member of his family to graduate from high school. He enlisted in the Marine Corps, served three years about which he has said nothing in print, and then enrolled in the University of Florida on the G. I. Bill. There, as he has recently written for *Rolling Stone*, he signed up for a fiction writing course with Andrew Lytle, a distinguished novelist, one of the Nashville Agrarians and past editor of the *Sewanee Review*. In due course Crew turned in his first story; Lytle read it and returned it, saying, "Burn it, son. Fire's a great refiner."<sup>7</sup> The relationship between student and mentor grew only slowly, but one night Lytle showed up at Crews's room and asked Crews to go out drinking with him. The bond was made, and Lytle was a source of constant encouragement and aid. Crews tells of Lytle's stopping him on the campus to tell him, "Son, you *look* too well. You're not *pale* enough. You don't *tremble* enough. Son, you're not working *hard* enough."<sup>8</sup>

After two years at the university Crews dropped out for eighteen months. While interviewing Robert Blake, Crews tells him all about it, about "my addiction to motorcycles, about how I once left Florida and rode a Triumph to Wyoming and up into Canada and out to California and back across the Rockies to Colorado Springs and then south across Raton Pass into New Mexico and down into the Mexican desert and from there to New Orleans. . . . 'One of the best things I ever did for myself. Kept a journal. Called it *There's Something about Being Straddle of a Thing*.'"<sup>9</sup>

After his year and a half on the road, Crews returned to the university and finished his degree. He then put in five years teaching at Broward Community College and writing radio copy for Nelson Boswell's show "Challenge and Response," a daily five-minute show something like Paul Harvey's "The Rest of the Story." When Crews left Boswell, who billed himself as "The Most Sincere Voice in Radio," he left 120,000 words "in the bank."<sup>10</sup> Crews's disciplined ability to write regularly and on demand goes back at least this far.

But *art* was not progressing nearly as well. Again, in his article on Robert Blake, Crews recalls those incredibly frustrating days.

I was sitting in a tiny room at the typewriter trying not to wake up my eight-year-old son. Beside me in boxes were manuscripts. All rejected. Rejected

because they were no good. I'd written five novels and hundreds of short stories. I'd written ten years, and not a word had seen print. . . . I was a writer. A fiction writer. And a goddamn good one. It was in me somewhere, but something had gone horribly wrong and it had pretty much driven me crazy."<sup>11</sup>

Crews was, obviously, miserable, but he knew that the fault lay in him, in his writing. His fiction was, by his own testimony, no good. It was *fake*! "When that thought of being *fake* formed in my speed-splattered brain, a brain that must have been carrying a blood pressure approaching stroke country, I had what I think of as the only revelation of my life."<sup>12</sup> Since Crews regards this as the turning point in his life, it is worth quoting at length.

For many and complicated reasons, circumstances had collaborated to make me ashamed that I was a tenant farmer's son. As weak and warped as it is, and as difficult as it is even now to admit it, I was so humiliated by the fact that I was from the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp in the worst hookworm and rickets part of Georgia I could not bear to think of it, and worse to believe it. Everything I had written had been out of a fear and loathing for what I was and who I was. It was all out of an effort to pretend otherwise. I believe to this day, and will always believe, that in that moment I literally saved my life, because the next thought—and it was more than a thought, it was a dead-solid conviction—was that all I had going for me in the world or would ever have was that swamp, all those goddamn mules, all those screw-worms that I'd dug out of pigs and all the other beautiful and dreadful and sorry circumstances that had made me the Grit I am and will always be. Once I realized that the way I saw the world and man's condition in it would always be exactly and inevitably shaped by everything which up to that moment had only shamed me, once I realized that, I was home free. Since that time I have found myself perpetually fascinating. It wasn't many weeks before I loved myself endlessly and profoundly. I have found no other such love anywhere in the world, nor do I expect to.<sup>13</sup>

Having found his voice, or, to put it another way, having realized that only his own voice was authentic, Crews wrote and published his first novel, *The Gospel Singer*, set in south Georgia, in which a young man with artistic talent strives to break away from the community of his childhood. The novel ends in tragedy, but Crews's life did not. He was taken on to teach creative writing at his alma mater, and the novels have come out since then in a steady stream. After the success of *The Gospel Singer* (1968) Crews wrote of the travails of a six-hundred-pound Metrecal freak living in a mined-out phosphate pit in *Naked in Garden Hills* (1969). His third novel is set in a Florida old folks home, *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* (1970), and his fourth in a Fort Lauderdale karate *dojo*. *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (1971) is a more successful work than *Garden Hills* or *Heaven* perhaps because Crews himself is less concerned with what might be called environmental

issues, or even with simple mortality, to oversimplify the previous two novels, than he is with the proper relation between the body and the mind. Crews shows an attitude similar to that of D. H. Lawrence in his distrust of the intellect or rational powers and his preference for instinct, the spirit, and the highly disciplined flesh.

After *Karate* Crews published *Car* (1972), in which the protagonists, brothers, eat a Ford Maverick as a publicity stunt for a hotel. The novel is sensational in its way, and reveals Crews's own ambivalent feelings toward the automobile, feelings he will give vent to over the years in various articles. As the characters in *Car* assert, in modern America often our most important moments, and therefore our most powerful memories, are associated with cars. Some of Crews's certainly are. In an *Esquire* column, "The Car," he recalls his first car, a 1938 Ford coupe.

One hot summer night on a clay road a young lady whom I'll never forget had herself braced and ready with one foot on the rearview mirror and the other foot on the wing vent. In the first few lovely frantic moments, she pushed out the wing vent, broke off the rearview mirror and left her little footprints all over the ceiling. The memory of it was so affecting that I could never bring myself to repair the vent or replace the head liner she had walked all over upside down.<sup>14</sup>

"We have found God in cars," Crews says, "or if not the true God, one as satisfying, so powerful and awe-inspiring that the distinction is too fine to matter. Except perhaps ultimately, but pray we must not think too much on that."<sup>15</sup>

Later Crews was to own a 1953 Mercury which he customized and then painted twenty-seven times. The car is not important, but the painting and repainting are, because they serve as a kind of self-confessed emblem for Crews's personality. "I went a little nuts as I am prone to do, because I'm the kind of guy who if he can't have too much of a thing doesn't want any at all."<sup>16</sup> This sentiment will apply to many aspects of Crews's life and work. To escape the clutches and compulsion of the Mercury, Crews sold it, and now he doesn't want any car at all. In his recent *Esquire* piece, "Why I Live Where I Live," he writes, "I love the size of Gainesville. I can walk anywhere I want to go, and consequently I have very little to do with that abomination before the Lord, the car."<sup>17</sup> For Crews, it's either broken wing vent and twenty-seven coats of paint or nothing at all.

After *Car* Crews turned to his long-time interest in falconry for the underlying metaphor of *The Hawk Is Dying* (1973). Set in Gainesville, the novel is a sensitive depiction of a troubled man, George Gattling, an automobile upholsterer from Bacon County, Georgia. Many of his clients are University of Florida faculty, and so he sometimes moves in faculty social circles, but he moves very uneasily. Crews has described his own sense of alienation from the university, from everywhere. "For half my life I have been in the University, but never of it. Never of anywhere, really. Except the place I felt, and that of necessity only in memory" (*AC*, p. 21). Crews has expressed that sentiment many times, but usually toward the institution, sometimes toward faculty members whom he finds pretentious or even cruel in their frustrations at not being richer or more famous or, perhaps, successful writers themselves.

I see teachers killing students every day. Students' papers come back to them with so many red marks on them that they cannot even see what they originally put down on the paper. The student has been left with nothing. Everything has been taken from him. He has been left with nowhere to begin again. That's not teaching; that's slaughter.<sup>18</sup>

Crews has claimed recently in "Teaching and Writing in the University" that teaching helps his writing, not that it gives him inspiration or material, but because, **as he puts it,**

when my writing is going badly, it is absolutely necessary for me to have something else I can do that makes me feel good about myself. When I spend three hours in the morning writing and the work is no good, I can go to the university and give every ounce of energy I have to teaching a class. When I walk out of the room or lecture hall a little voice in the back of my head says, 'Son, you may can't write, but you sure as hell can teach.' That may sound cute, but it is only the truth. I need that kind of feeling about myself **to sustain me in the world.**<sup>19</sup>

Crews may be becoming more of the university than he realizes.

After *Hawk* Crews moved his scene to Jacksonville for *The Gypsy's Curse* (1974). In this tour de force of point of view Crews has his story told by Marvin Molar, a deaf-mute, legless handbalancer who lives more or less contentedly with three other men above the Fireman's gym until their male Eden is destroyed by Hester, who, despite what may be mitigating circumstances, seems to me as evil as Satan.

Marvin is, of course, not Crews's first "freak"; there had been Foot in *The Gospel Singer*, Mayhew in *Garden Hills*, and a host of others. Crews's work is so full of freaks and midgets that his wife once asked him if he planned to make a career out of them.<sup>20</sup> There is no question he is fascinated by them. Perhaps he never got over his own feeling of being stared at while paralyzed as a child. Perhaps that experience gave him empathy with the grotesques of the world. In any case, Crews has written about freaks many times in fiction and especially in "Carny," an essay which appeared originally in *Playboy*. Twice in his life Crews traveled with carnivals (and we're not talking about Ringling Brothers here), once just after the Marine Corps and once for the *Playboy* article. He sees in freaks, it appears, some kind of reproach. We are, those of us who appear to be "normal," hidden from the world. Freaks are vulnerable; they are *always* naked in the way Crews claims to want to be.

If you are less than three feet tall you have to deal with that fact every second of every day of your life. And everyone witnesses your effort. You go into a bar and you can't get up onto a stool. . . . If you're a lady with a beard, every face you meet is a mirror to give you back the disgust and horror and unreasonableness of your predicament. No matter which corner you turn on

which street in which city of the world, you can expect to meet that mirror. And I suppose I have never been able to forgive myself the grotesqueries and aberrations I am able to hide with such impunity in my own life.<sup>21</sup>

Much of Crews's nonfiction seems an attempt to expose himself, to rid himself of what he apparently sees as an unfair advantage.

Crews's attitude toward women, on the other hand, is less affectionate. Hester ruins life at the Fireman's gym. Her powerful sexuality and her innate evil destroy the men she comes in contact with. Is she a typical Crews heroine? Does she represent Crews's "attitude toward women"? Some will think so. The women of his childhood were, in no modern sense of the word, "liberated" or professional, and Crews seems to have difficulty with the contemporary, self-conscious feminist. In an article for *Playgirl*, "The Unfeminine Mystique," Crews laments the state of things. "I'm sick and tired of women in my face and on my case. And I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."<sup>22</sup> He recounts a run-in with a "feminist" in Lillian's, *his* bar, and it sets him thinking: "There is great confusion on the part of some men—and certainly I am one of them—about just what the hell we should call females."<sup>23</sup> He goes on to ask for a kind of truce.

Women have had a hard time of it: struggling for the right to own land, struggling for the right to vote, struggling for the right to equal pay for equal work. If women want to talk reasonably about their plight—a plight that obviously touches all of us—then some day we may have a chance to achieve equality between women and men. But hysteria and hostility won't bring us any closer to that day. In the meantime, I would appreciate a discussion at least at arm's length and with voices that are not filled with venom and false accusation.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways Crews's next works, *A Feast of Snakes* (1976) and *A Childhood* (1978), represent the closing of a cycle. In both books, his two best, Crews returns to the territory of his boyhood and of his first novel. Of *A Childhood* enough has been directly said. In *A Feast of Snakes* Joe Lon Mackey, the trapped, nearly illiterate small town protagonist, seems a projection of Crews; through Joe Lon, Crews asks what happens to the young man who *doesn't* get out, who *doesn't* join the Marines, travel the country, go to college, become immersed in a career. Joe Lon is, of course, not Harry Crews, but they share a lot of interests. The first of these is blood sports. The training and fighting of pit bulldogs, which occupies an important place in *Feast*, is a lifelong interest in Crews's, as he makes clear in an essay, "A Day at the Dogfights," his attempt to set the record straight not only about how the dogs are treated and fought but about how we Americans really feel about the blood sports. In this essay and in "Cockfighting: An Unfashionable View" he first confesses, then accuses. "I love blood sports. Not a particularly admirable trait, but one that I've always had and one I've never tried to suppress or find the reasons for," and "I've always been addicted to blood sports of all kinds. And I make no apology for it. Where I come from we don't confuse animals with people. We don't



sleep with poodles or whisper baby talk to horses."<sup>25</sup> The accusation is of hypocrisy. "I just wonder why we can't tell the truth about blood sports, which would go a long way toward telling the truth about ourselves. We are a violent culture. We like to see the two dugouts emptied at baseball games and the players—armed with bats or anything they can put a hand to—break each other's heads."<sup>26</sup> He goes on to describe how the crowds love the violence at a prizefight, long for the fiery accident at a stock car race. This, Crews says, is America.

Here was the faith that brought the black man from Africa, the faith that still kicks the shit out of American-born Mexicans in Texas, the faith of the officer saying in his laconic but believing voice, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it." It was so ugly, it was beautiful. It was mine and I would no more deny it than I would deny my own blood. And disguise that faith how you will, it lives, breathes, and gets fatter every year in this great country of ours. Give us the world and this would be the paradigm we'd use to remake it.<sup>27</sup>

Oddly enough, in spite of his love of sport Crews is no hunter, but he doesn't pretend to be. While he is visiting the L. L. Bean store in Maine, he is wry about the men who couldn't "find their way out of a ten-acre woodlot, much less have any use for the kind of high-grade, finely-wrought outdoor gear carried by L. L. Bean,"<sup>28</sup> . . . "Shopping their little hearts out, just as though this was the basement of Macy's in the last mad hour of a sale."<sup>29</sup>

It is pretty clear, I hope, that it is falseness Crews hates and falseness he strives to avoid in his writing. He seems at times to be driven to tell the truth out of a fear of lying. Getting the truth said, in print, eliminates the danger. This leads, obviously enough, to a confessional mode.

The "confessions" are not always unflattering ones. In "Carny," for example, Crews reassures the people in the carnival, and thus the reader, that he is discreet and trustworthy, that in his journalism he has "never blown anybody's cover. Never."<sup>30</sup> It's a point of honor with Crews, one he repeats in "A Day at the Dog-fights": "I've never burned anybody. Nobody gets hurt letting me watch and letting me write."<sup>31</sup> Crews needs to preserve this reputation, of course, in order to continue to gain entry into the semi-legal and illegal events he wants to write about.

Crews is also a faithful and consistent friend. In piece after piece he praises his companion Charne, who has accompanied him on a number of expeditions, most notably the hike up the Appalachian Trail. He will put himself to considerable trouble for a friend, as we learn in "Running Fox"; there we watch him sit all night with Buck, drunk, violent, lovesick over a woman who, it seems, would not allow him his heart's desire: "to feed in her lilies."<sup>32</sup> Buck, like anybody suffering from a case of the unrequited, is tedious, boring, dangerous, but Crews knows that love hurts; he sticks with him and brings him through.

In other places his self-revelations are not of things so admirable. His own drinking, for example, is a recurring subject. Crews is nostalgic, he tells us in "The Goat Day Olympics," for his cabin at Lake Swan, thirty miles outside of Gainesville.

"You take me back to a place that's been good to me and mine and I'm apt to tear up like a baby. All those dirt lanes I ran down trying to work off all those hangovers. . . ." <sup>33</sup> In "A Walk in the Country" he speaks of his respect for neat, controlled, well-mannered drunks: "I had always held such men in great admiration, being as I am one of the all-time sloppy, disgusting drunks, the kind mothers can point out to their children as an example of the final evil of alcohol." <sup>34</sup> While on assignment interviewing Charles Bronson, Crews overdid it a little. "Frankly, I didn't give a shit if he talked or not, because I was at death's door after coming down with a severe case of drunk the night before. I'd managed to cleverly secrete a flask of medicine on my person, however, and was only looking for the right moment to get well." <sup>35</sup> That was in northern Idaho. In Alaska things were no better. "I woke up next morning in the rented National car with a pounding head and a dry mouth. I thought at first an ant or maybe even a bee had stung my right arm, was stinging it. I looked down to knock it off and damned if I didn't have a tattoo. A hinge on my right elbow." <sup>36</sup> Drinking is important to Crews. He searches out a bar "the way other men might search out the right wife or the right church. No blasphemy intended, but I learned a long time ago that for many of us *where* we drink is more important than *what* we drink, more important even than *if* we drink." <sup>37</sup>

Crews has opinions on subjects other than bars, though. Critics, book reviewers, for example, come in for commentary. While he is commiserating with Charles Bronson about the treatment Bronson gets from film critics, Crews says, "I stopped reading reviews of my novels . . . except for one or two lousy fuckers I compulsively read because they are such bad critics and bad people. They obviously don't like books at all. That's probably why they became literary critics, so they could say shitty things about books." <sup>38</sup> Reading critics can be dangerous to writers, destroy their confidence, if they take the critics' remarks seriously. James Boatwright in the *New York Times* "wasn't just unhappy that I had written the novel, he seemed unhappy that I was alive." <sup>39</sup> Critics are thus often malicious and incompetent. "Even when they know something is wrong, they rarely know where to place the blame." <sup>40</sup> (The problem with critics, for Crews, may be that the victims can't fight back. In the sports Crews loves, at least the dogs and cocks have an even chance.)

Sometimes Crews's confessions get into areas which are almost embarrassingly personal. He tells us lightheartedly, for instance, of matters that are really not much of our business, like the difficulties he had in getting his vasectomy, <sup>41</sup> and sometimes he tells us things which we just don't want to know, are made nervous by knowing. "Climbing the Tower" is one of those times.

Crews was at a reading engagement at the University of Texas in Austin and had pointed out to him, by his well-meaning English professor host, the tower from which Charles Whitman had shot and killed twelve people and wounded at least thirty-three others. That night, after the fiction reading and the following obligatory party, Crews, drunk, went out and sat on the quad in front of the tower. The words of Goethe ran through his mind: "There is no crime of which I cannot conceive myself guilty." He could imagine himself on that tower with a "Marine

Corps footlocker full of death."<sup>42</sup> He had been having a bad day, "feeling diaphanous, still feeling the morning terrors and black twirlies, a burden I carry better at some times than others."<sup>43</sup> It was one of those days, he says, "when I feel my own mortality stick in my throat, when I can't swallow it or spit it up."<sup>44</sup> After Charles Whitman had finally been taken and the autopsy performed, it was learned that he had a brain tumor that might have caused his killing spree. Crews refuses to take comfort from this, because it is beside the point.

I hoped that I would be spared being on the tower myself, because if I believe anything, I believe that the tower is waiting out there. I have no answers as to why it is out there, or even speculations about it, but out there somewhere, around some corner, or in some green meadow, or in some busy street it is. Waiting.<sup>45</sup>

"Climbing the Tower," is a powerful and disturbing piece, but it is one of several that show most clearly where Crews's power comes from. It comes from an ability on his part, in spite of his confessed tendency toward garrulousness as an interviewer, to identify. Crews can imagine himself as Charles Whitman. He can, in "The Trucker Militant," empathize with the independent trucker because he feels that the trucker and the sharecropper whose world he knows so well see the world from the same place. In the best piece of nonfiction, perhaps, that Crews has ever published, he writes movingly of Robert Blake, "Baretta," because of an almost uncanny identification with him. In this piece, perhaps, is the secret of Crews' success.

It began as a regular assignment from *Esquire*. Crews flew to California, got mugged that night in an alley in Pasadena, and in a state of pain and disgust went out to stage 37 of Universal Studios to do the job. As a conventional "profile" on Blake and how "Baretta" gets made, it's a good piece. But as a revelation of how Crews's feelings run and how they influence and power his writing, it is a wonder. As Blake begins to tell his story, Crews is stunned:

"Who's the director out there, his name?" I asked, not really caring one way or another. I only wanted to get this wild man talking, talking about anything, because the moment I saw him, before we ever spoke, I felt a strange blood bond, an almost painful shock of recognition. It was all the more painful because as contradictory as it may sound, I did not know what I had recognized.<sup>46</sup>

Crews finds out what he had only intuited; he and Blake are sharers. They shared the same kind of boyhood. Blake's descriptions of his childhood are nearly interchangeable with Crews's. He says of his father, "he'd get up in the middle of the night, decided that the kids were his enemies, and come in and beat the crap out of us."<sup>47</sup> As Blake goes on with his life's story, Crews's mind wanders away to his own, to his "daddy" beating up his mother, to the fear that filled his home, to the way Blake's father and Crews's both ended up pitiful wrecks. When Crews's mind

returns to the present scene, he is right in step, hasn't missed a beat. "Something beautiful and dreadful and mysterious had been happening all day. I felt it every time Blake spoke directly to me. But I had no name for what it was, did not then, do not now. I kept thinking that what Blake was saying, I'd said before. That what he had done, I'd done too. And it all went as deep and intimate and moral as blood and bone."<sup>48</sup>

Blake and Crews have obviously shared a lot of experiences. But more than that, it seems that these experiences have shaped their psyches. Blake tells Crews: "I have a dream, and I bet I have it once a week.' He is bemused. It is almost as though he is talking of himself to himself. 'Wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, I'm naked. And I can't get no clothes on. . . . And it's always in a public place. . . .'"<sup>49</sup> Blake, who has been psychoanalyzed, talks about the dream:

"The essence of that dream is what we been talking about. That wherever you are, you don't belong. That everybody else has got it, but you ain't got it. Everybody else has the equipment. But they can see what you are, they can see because you're fucking naked. Your belly ain't right, or your dick ain't circumcised, or whatever it is. **THEY CAN SEE IT!**"

By now I'm on my feet holding my head. "Jesus, Jesus," I'm saying. I show him my arm. "Look, I got goose bumps." I put my hand on his shoulder. "I swear on my eyes I have the same goddamn dream. Over and over, I have that goddamn dream."<sup>50</sup>

Crews's transcendental sense of blood kinship with Blake may be, in its intensity, a once-in-a-lifetime event, but the source of the power of his nonfiction may be found there. He has an ability to identify, to empathize, to merge his identity with the people he's talking to and the situations he's in. And having made himself one with them, the prose passes that effect on to us, so that we the readers feel what Crews feels. We identify with him. Sometimes the result is drunken joy, sometimes it's the fear of the madness and vulnerability that we all know we have in us, sometimes it's the terror that we will be exposed for what we are. But, in any case, when Crews is at his best the goose bumps rise on the reader's arm.

## 2. Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection\*

Frank W. Shelton

With the recent widely heralded publication of his autobiography, *A Childhood*, Harry Crews has attained a prominence which should lead to serious consideration of his previous work in fiction. Though frequently and for the most part respectfully reviewed, his eight novels, published between 1968 and 1976, seem to have now been generally forgotten. But the appearance of his autobiography and also his collection of nonfiction pieces, *Blood and Grits*, in 1979 calls for an evaluation of his career.

Crews is a very powerful, at times even outlandish, and uneven novelist. In the tradition of Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor in his use of the grotesque, Crews has faced directly the problem of the encroachment of modernism on the traditional Southern ways of life. He shows in compelling, and often bizarre and violent detail, the consequences for modern Southerners of living lives stripped of sustaining tradition and meaning. Crews is ambivalent toward his Southernness. When asked if he sees himself as part of a Southern tradition of writing, he responded, "I've never really been very comfortable with schools of writing or, as you say, the idea of myself as part of some tradition. The tradition I'm part of is that of storytelling. I don't think of myself as a Southern novelist."<sup>1</sup> Yet as he himself recognizes, his novels could not have been written or set anywhere but in the South. So Crews, interesting as a novelist himself, is also a suggestive instance of a Southerner writing at a time when regional distinctiveness is on the wane, making use of certain traditional Southern concepts, especially the idea of ritual, but dealing with them in the context of a South which is inevitably the modern world. Experiencing the violence and chaos of that world in his very bones, he sensitively and vividly registers the shocks of modern existence, making his work worthy of serious analysis.

---

\*This essay first appeared in the *Southern Literary Journal* 12 (Spring, 1980):97-113 and appears here with that journal's permission.

In his autobiography Crews recounts how the Sears, Roebuck catalogue stimulated his imagination when he was young:

I first became fascinated with the Sears catalogue because all the people in its pages were perfect. Nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half-chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple. And if they didn't have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire, or knives, or fishhooks. But the people in the catalogue had no such hurts. . . . Young as I was, though, I had known for a long time that it was all a lie. I knew that under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Since the scars he speaks of are not only physical but spiritual and emotional as well, in this passage is adumbrated the basic tension underlying all Crews's fiction: man's yearning for perfection, yet the inevitable imperfection of the world and life in it.

Crews has often said words to this effect: "I am concerned with men doing the best they can with what they've got to do it with; and that means time, place, manner, circumstance, just those considerations of staying alive that all of us have got to deal with."<sup>3</sup> His works are very stark and elemental, dealing with what man must do to survive in the world. Survival implies the search for something to believe in, some larger entity or set of beliefs through which the individual can approach that perfection he yearns for. In Crews's novels society and Southern tradition provide no stability at all. His settings are either the primitively brutal rural South, where merely living the day is the uppermost consideration, or the commercialized, vulgarized South of modern Florida, where tradition is nonexistent. Consequently, man is forced back upon himself to find or create his own sense of meaning and belonging.

The form of the novels suggests the desperate human plight. Grotesqueries of plot, situation, and character abound. Crews has explained:

I like to start with something that is obviously a world that nobody can quarrel with. . . . Then in a very slow kind of left-handed way, left-handed in the sense that you don't call attention to it, it just slides off the edge of the real world into a thing that can't possibly be true. Except it *is* true; at least, I think it is.<sup>4</sup>

In essence, he distorts the real world to discover the truth beneath the surface of what we all accept as real. This helps explain why he focuses on grotesques and frequently on literal freaks. Certainly, following an honorable Southern tradition, he uses grotesque characters to suggest man's incompleteness and alienation, his estrangement from the world, and a sense of the existential absurdity of human existence. Yet his purpose for the grotesque differs in a significant way from that of Flannery O'Connor or Carson McCullers, I think. For those writers grotesque

characters represent deviations from some at least implicit norm. Even though grotesqueness may be the necessary human condition, a standard does exist by which to measure such deviations. Crews is much less sure of such standards. Although he resents critics emphasizing his use of freaks, he has explained why they appeal to him. Freaks are people with obvious and evident afflictions with whom we should feel a kinship because we too have our own aberrations: "We can say we are normal because a psychological, sexual, or even spiritual abnormality can—with a little luck—be safely hidden from the rest of the world. But if you are less than three feet tall, you have to deal with that fact every second of every day of your life." He continues, "I suppose I have never been able to forgive myself the grotesqueries and aberrations I am able to hide with such impunity in my own life."<sup>5</sup> In such a view, normality becomes a meaningless term, a concept clung to in order to avoid facing the truth. Reading Crews's novels, one does not remain nearly so detached as when reading other novelists of the grotesque, for one does not feel superior to the characters. Crews would agree with Leslie Fiedler's contention that, while in the past freaks were viewed as examples of the Other with whom we could complacently contrast ourselves, now we see freaks as embodying our Secret Selves. Fiedler observes, "The distinction between audience and exhibit, we and them, normal and Freak, is revealed as an illusion, desperately, perhaps even necessarily, defended, but untenable in the end."<sup>6</sup> Normality is an illusion; all people must face the terror and mystery of existence; the fact that we can hide our aberrations is no consolation and may ultimately lead to their eruption in violent and unpredictable ways.

Crews's use of freaks with imperfect bodies strongly enforces his theme of the human desire for perfection. Man's inherent imperfection, manifested in the body, conflicts with his yearning for spiritual perfection. Crews evokes the traditional duality of body and spirit, the body representing the biological trap man finds himself in, which intensifies his yearning for spiritual sustenance. Thus, man is, paradoxically, very primitive, acting on instinct and obsession, and yet also at least attempting to nourish the spiritual side as well, for his aim is always to unite the self through ritual with some higher order of being, association with which will redeem his inherent incompleteness. Such aspiration is almost always doomed to failure, but the effort is itself meaningful.

A significant development in Crews's handling of this theme can be traced in his eight novels. In the first three, *The Gospel Singer*, *Naked in Garden Hills*, and *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven*, one finds a direct treatment of religion as a possible source of meaning. Since religion is found inadequate, in the next four novels, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, *Car*, *The Hawk Is Dying*, and *The Gypsy's Curse*, Crews turns to alternate kinds of physical rituals in his treatment of man's search for value, including karate, hawk training, and body building. In most of these novels are found a performer and an audience, the rituals of religion having been in effect replaced by the rituals of entertainment. Further, these novels consider whether human love and companionship may provide a release from the trap man finds himself in. Such solutions to man's dilemma are finally unsatisfactory, and his latest novel, *A Feast of Snakes*, suggests that violence of the most

horrible kind is the only available response to man's condition. Thus, Crews's vision has grown progressively darker over the eleven years he has been publishing his fiction.

A clearer sense of the development of his vision can be gained by briefly examining how each novel reflects his treatment of this issue. His first novel, *The Gospel Singer* (1968), most explicitly deals with religion, as the epigraph indicates: "Men to whom God is dead worship one another." The setting, Enigma, Georgia, which the first sentence says is "a dead end," suggests the human condition.<sup>7</sup> Most residents of the town want to escape, but few are successful. The Gospel Singer has been able to leave, but only through the accidents of his good looks and his voice, and he is constantly drawn back to Enigma. While he purports to be religious, he is corrupt within and tortured by people's attitudes toward him. In their desperate, degraded condition they worship him as a god, thinking he can heal the sick and raise them from their fallen state. Powerless to help, he alternately hates them and feels wrenching sympathy for their condition. They are so desperate for salvation, they pursue him ceaselessly; in response he clutches his memory of MaryBell, who was his first convert and whom he corrupted, as "his touchstone. He felt sometimes that it was only by her that he knew himself real" (*GS*, p. 53). In other words, his sin is his reality, and his sin is connected with Enigma. In the contest of flesh and spirit, he is determined that flesh triumph. So while he may have physically escaped Enigma, he has not escaped the human condition.

In his lost state he can be contrasted with two other characters. Willalee Bookatee Hull is a Negro preacher, a disciple of the Gospel Singer, who, before the novel opens, has murdered MaryBell. Not remembering why he killed her, he is waiting for the Gospel Singer to explain why so he can die reconciled with God. The Gospel Singer is the catalyst for his remembering: MaryBell has told him the truth about the Gospel Singer's corruption, and he killed her in retaliation. Even though he is a murderer and is finally lynched, Willalee dies at peace with himself and his God. Foot, the owner of the Freak Fair which follows the Gospel Singer everywhere, also has a sense of self and identity which the Gospel Singer lacks. He asserts the principle of relativity: "Every man invents the world and justifies everything in it through the miracle of himself, in the same way that every man is convinced that his name appears first on the scroll of Heaven" (*GS*, p. 208). Foot sees that the same impulse that causes people to go hear the Gospel Singer leads them to his Freak Fair: the Gospel Singer is actually part of the freak show. The crowd members, however, get comfort by contrasting their own supposed normality with the obvious freakishness of the show people.

By the end of the novel the Gospel Singer realizes that he can hide the truth no longer. Admitting that he is more responsible for MaryBell's death than Willalee is, he confesses the truth to the crowd: "I'm the biggest sinner here. . . . Did you think I could be what you said I was? Didn't you know from your own black hearts what mine must be like?" (*GS*, pp. 234-235). He embraces his common humanity and common grotesqueness with the crowd—and they kill him for his efforts. Religion is thus shown to have no relationship with truth; people want only comfort and the illusion of meaning. At the end of the novel they have



reaffirmed their belief in the purity of the Gospel Singer and MaryBell. The Church of the Gospel Singer, founded by Willalee, will flourish. The only escape from the enigmatic human condition is through the illusion of perfection. And people will kill to protect that illusion.

*Naked in Garden Hills* (1969), which Crews feels is his best novel, treats religion in an almost allegorical way. Its title evoking the Garden of Eden, the novel includes a God figure who never appears, Jack O'Boylan, an industrialist who looked at Garden Hills, "saw that it was real good," and built a phosphate mining plant.<sup>8</sup> Yet he abruptly and mysteriously canceled his operation, leaving the residents in an inferno-like landscape to wait and hope for his return, as if they were waiting for Godot.

The authority figure to whom they look is Fat Man, the son of the original owner of the land. Though they assume he is in contact with O'Boylan and knows the secret of their lives, in reality he is trapped just like everyone else. His entrapment is symbolized by his body, six hundred pounds of fat, and his going on uncontrollable binges of Metrecal drinking. His early aspiration for love was frustrated, leaving him completely dependent, both physically and spiritually. He was an idealist: "He, himself, had never had any other desire than to put everything outside himself inside himself, to put the world in his stomach. And he had known for a long time that he was not alone in such dreams" (*NGH*, p. 115). In essence his dream is of perfection, of remaking the world to conform to the measurements of a man.

The person who takes care of him is Jester, a three-foot Negro jockey—his opposite in almost every way. Jester knows that he is physically perfect, but his flaw is fear. Though dominated by the idea of horse, he is terrified to race one because the first time he tried, the horse committed suicide by running into a wall, gravely injuring Jester. He surmises, "It was clearly a perverse violation of the natural order of things. . . . If that's the way they wanted it, that's the way they could have it. All bets were off" (*NGH*, pp. 140-41). He contents himself with dreaming of horse; only in his dream can he find stability and meaning.

Jack O'Boylan never returns, but a new savior appears to revive the waste land: Dolly Furgeson. A beauty queen raised in Garden Hills, she goes to New York to search out O'Boylan and get a "sign." Stumbling into a job in a go-go establishment, she learns that the world runs on the conjunction of money, sex, and power. Realizing that O'Boylan will never come back, she returns determined to open a nightclub to display "Dolly Doo and Her Dimple Review" and attract tourists. This is the first instance in Crews's work of a motif which will reappear: the rituals of the beauty contest and show business as manifestations of the modern ideal. She bends everyone to her will; everyone—except Fat Man—accepts her organization, even though they are initially ignorant of her goals. But "they did know that organization was highly prized. The world ran on it. . . . And the man that doubted it could never expect to wet his lips at the spring of success" (*NGH*, pp. 138-39). Dolly offers hope in a heretofore hopeless world. Her control of that world finally subdues Fat Man, who is helpless after Jester joins her organization. Her wisdom, and the vision underlying the novel, is what she learned in New York. She tells Fat

Man, "Jack O'Boylan is a thing in all of us that eats raw meat and drinks blood. And you either admit it and use it, or you get fed to somebody" (*NGH*, p. 159).

By the conclusion of the novel everyone is consumed by Dolly's voracious appetite for success. Fat Man ends as an exhibit in a cage in the nightclub; Jester ends playing jockey at the club by riding another person in a travesty of horsemanship. In the Darwinian godless world of the novel, man's desire to find meaning in his life leads to degradation, exploitation, and the denial of love. Clearly, there is no Garden of Eden to which to aspire. Fat Man wonders, "Was man a joke, a shaggy dog story of incredible length, stretching on now toward three thousand years?" (*NGH*, p. 109). The novel seems to answer yes.

*This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* (1970) effectively disposes of institutional religion as a subject for Crews. The novel deals with old age and death, the ultimate signs of man's imperfection and limitation. Setting the novel in a "Senior Club," Crews treats the ways people cope with death by seeking redemption or escape. The central focus of the novel is Jeremy Tetley, an eighty-year-old man whose time to die has come. He seeks release through flaunting the rules of the establishment and through trying to seduce Molly, a seventy-one-year-old resident—a pathetic yet somehow heroic act.

Two characters do combat for Jeremy's soul on the day of his death. One is Junior Bledsoe, an award-winning grave plot salesman who "believed in death with a missionary zeal. He believed in the rightness and justness of death."<sup>9</sup> Devoted to "taking the guesswork out of where you're going" (*TT*, p. 104), he distributes brochures with pictures of gravestones on them. Hiram Peters, on the other hand, is a minister who hands out pamphlets with the title "There Is No Death." Ironically, however, he is an atheist who relies on the pamphlets because of his fear that dying people will ask him to explain their lives—and he has no answers. Thus he has literally willed himself not to believe in death.

Arrayed around these characters are others who seek meaning to their lives. Jefferson Davis Munroe, a midget masseur, feels trapped in his body and wants nothing more than to grow, to be normal. To him his shortness is "the knowledge of the world's evil planted in him" (*TT*, p. 40). He looks to Carlita, a non-English-speaking Haitian voodoo woman with whom he cannot even communicate, to transform him through magic.

He had thought Axel (named Pearl Lee Gates), the giant owner of the club and of much of the nearby town, could help him because of her control and power over her surroundings, but, trapped in her own body just as he is, she desperately desires release from the burden of her life. Born and raised in the Senior Club, she feels she has lived all her life in a grave and wants only to be touched by another human being. She finally seduces—partially rapes—Junior, much against his will since he fears sex, love, and children, suggesting life as they do rather than death. Yet he seems finally won over by her. In this episode is the first suggestion in Crews's works that love offers an escape from man's trapped condition.

Religion, however, is finally rejected. The title refers to Axel, to the Senior Club, and also by implication to earthly life itself. When Jeremy is dying, Jefferson Davis tells him, "I wisht it was something I could leave. But I ain't got a thing I can leave.

I don't know anybody that has. You done be all right though. You doing it fine. Don't take a thing but guts. It's all it ever taken" (*TT*, pp. 181-82). There is no ultimate meaning to life, no comfort for the fact of death. Perhaps life can be made bearable through courage or love, or through the illusion, which Jefferson Davis retains at the end, that magic can make one normal. But whatever resolution man finds, it must take death into account.

Crews's next four novels explore various secular rituals as avenues to meaning, since conventional religion is no longer a force in his world, and he more explicitly considers the role of human love. In *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (1971) karate is an almost religious ritual through which people attempt to link and fulfill body and spirit. A symbol of purity, order, peace, and control, it depends on ritual physical training and self-discipline, elements which become increasingly important at this point in Crews's career. "Karate could not be built on top of anything else. Everything had to be scraped away, right down to the barren nothingness before karate could begin to grow."<sup>10</sup> The individual must then descend inside himself to find the true meaning of karate and his existence.

John Kaimnon, the central character, is a drifter, a searcher of wide and brutalizing experience who is attracted to the karateka by their self-discipline and their certainty. He goes through many trials with them, but the essence of his problem is an inability to eliminate everything but karate from his world. To the assertion that "to believe what's here, you've got to disbelieve the rest of the world," he responds, "I'm good at believing. But I'm not worth a shit at *not* believing. Like I said, I believe it all" (*KTS*, p. 50). In essence, he is another Fat Man who wants to embrace and consume the whole world.

His closest friendship is with Gaye Nell, or "Brown Belt" as she wishes to be called. Both beauty queen and karate expert, she is, as John comes to see, modern America's ideal, uniting sex and violence. She has tried to reject the world, but unsuccessfully, as her continued participation in beauty pageants suggests. The final conflict in the novel concerns the baby she is going to have by John. She wants an abortion because the child would somehow mar her perfection, while he wants her to have the child.

Belt, the leader of the karate group, embodies what all the karateka aspire to. A person of absolute discipline and control, he points out the full implications of his way of life: "I'm not from anywhere. I'm from everywhere. I'm from wherever I find myself standing. . . . I've retired from the rest of it. Said good-by to all that. The only country I'll ever defend is the five-foot circle surrounding me wherever I happen to be" (*KTS*, p. 150). His perfection involves separation from the rest of the world, an admirable goal in its way but also one fraught with the dangers of loneliness and isolation.<sup>11</sup>

John, and finally Gaye Nell as well, find that they are unable to deny the world in this fashion—they are too much a part of it. John particularly cannot accept the nonviolent spirit of ideal karate. However, far from believing in everything as at the beginning, now he believes in nothing except, as he tells Gaye Nell, "I believe in you. . . . And I believe you can have my baby" (*KTS*, p. 210). This requires her submission to him, her willingness to be Gaye Nell, a woman and a mother, and not

"Brown Belt." Though involving a stereotypical view of woman, the conclusion suggests that imperfect human love in an imperfect world can offer fulfillment.

*Car* (1972) continues the interest in technology so evident in *Naked in Garden Hills*. As in the earlier novel, Crews explores how characters are defined by and cope with technology, in this case the automobile. The most interesting character for my purposes is Herman, an idealist and dreamer who determines to express his love for cars by literally consuming one. Although his actions are corrupted by exploitation and show business, he is actually attempting to perform a communion ritual with his god. As Crews says elsewhere, "We have found God in cars."<sup>12</sup> Since our lives seem to body forth no spiritual reality, we must, in a queerly Emersonian way, try to find the spiritual through the material. After he has eaten the first piece of the car, Herman has a dream, joyful but terrifying, that he is filled up with cars until he finally becomes a car. His dream is a vision of both dehumanization and "immortality"; whenever any particular part wears out, it is simply replaced by a new one: "Replace everything until he was not even what he was when he started. Replace everything with all things until he was nobody because he was everybody."<sup>13</sup> Such is Crews's grotesque adaptation to modern times of Emerson's vision of the desire for union of self and Oversoul.

Finally, however, the novel suggests, as does *Karate*, that the spiritual cannot be found through the material, indeed that the spiritual cannot be found at all. After eating the bumper and part of the fender, Herman is unable to continue. Coming to see that "he was defined by the car" (C, p. 113), he decides it is simply impossible to go on. "I love that Maverick car. And I think because I love it so much, I can't stand for it to cause that kind of pain in me. I mean I can stand the *pain*—I think I could stand the pain if it was just pain—but I can't stand that kind of pain from something I love" (C, p. 135). Thus, no communion between the human and the inhuman is possible.

Herman, like John in *Karate*, leaves the scene of action at the end, and also like John he has a woman with him—Margo, the complaisant hotel prostitute who has loved and encouraged him during his ordeal. She has selflessly wanted to give herself to him, but while attempting to eat the car he was blind to her as a sexual being. After he recognizes his limitations and abandons his quest, however, he sees Margo as a woman, and the novel's ending implies again the possibility of human love as a vehicle for meaning.

*The Hawk Is Dying* (1973) carries man's search one step further, and the level of desperation is much greater than in *Car*. George Gattling, owner of a successful car upholstery business, is filled with anxiety over the meaninglessness of his life. He has followed every precept he was taught as a child but finds success empty. The religious elements of his dilemma are suggested by his thoughts on the mystery of God: "How beautiful it all was, he thought, if you could believe it. How terrifying it all was if you could not."<sup>14</sup> Since he cannot believe, the only thing that makes sense is trying to train a hawk. This action represents something "real" to him, a simplification of his life by reducing it to the basics—blood and conquest, and also tradition. For he trains the hawk in a very traditional manner, following his talismanic text *The Art of Falconry*, written by Emperor Frederick the Second

in the thirteenth century. Training the hawk also involves training himself: both hawk and man must go without food and sleep until the hawk is "manned." Thus, the familiar Crews motifs of self-discipline and self-control reappears, for training the hawk means to George disciplining his own body and spirit as well. However, Crews modifies his vision of love, which was important in his last novels. George does not know what love is, and one of the appealing traits of hawks is that "they could not love. They didn't want to be your buddy. Ever" (*HID*, p. 141). On the other hand, George must have love for the hawk to train him properly.

Allen Shepherd, the only critic who has dealt at any length with Crews, notes that the novel basically concerns "the nature of man's nature: what is and is not natural for a man to want and do."<sup>15</sup> Everyone else in the novel, with one important exception, says that George is "crazy" and what he is doing is "unnatural," but in fact the sterility of their lives disqualifies them from having any authority to determine what is "natural." The exception is Fred, his retarded or genius—George is never sure which—nephew. He is the one person George loves, and his beauty, total obscurity, and mystery give him value in George's eyes. Seeming to live totally in the present and occasionally uttering single enigmatic words which may or may not apply, Fred appears entirely free. George muses: "How wonderful it would be to have that kind of wall around you. A wall of unreason that could not be penetrated. It seemed the only freedom" (*HID*, p. 42). Fred's mysterious death by drowning in his waterbed is a catalyst for George's increasing obsession with the hawk. With his death, George "felt as though everything were going mad, and felt at the same time as though the madness had been just below the surface of his life all along, waiting to break through. And now it finally had" (*HID*, p. 79).

While everyone else is performing the traditional funeral rites, George trains the hawk—perhaps the best tribute to Fred he could give. When he has finally manned the hawk, "for the first time in his life, George felt himself part of some immutable continuity" (*HID*, p. 221). Yet significantly his successful search for fulfillment involves the inhuman, in fact demands the exclusion of the human realm altogether, a change from the previous novels. Crews seems increasingly to despair at the ability of people to reach any real understanding of others. Certainly, the characters cannot communicate with one another, and the only figures George feels close to, Fred and the hawk, do not communicate verbally. In addition, an irony at the novel's conclusion qualifies George's success. He feels ashamed of what he has done to the hawk, and while he is determined not to think about it, "he knew he would think about it. It couldn't be helped" (*HID*, pp. 221-22). In effect, he has deprived the hawk of freedom while vicariously experiencing it himself. By controlling the hawk he has destroyed what had appealed to him. Yet this seemed the only escape from the trap of his life, and certainly his way of coping is more constructive than the blind devotion to the conventional and acceptable of the so-called normals of society.

*The Gypsy's Curse* (1974) continues Crews's consideration of the role of love as opposed to discipline and training. Marvin Molar is the first actual freak Crews has dealt with since *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven*, and since Marvin tells the

story in the first person, the reader cannot retain the detachment so characteristic of fiction of the grotesque. Crews forces us to see Marvin as a three-dimensional human being. A legless deaf-mute handbalancer who performs for pay before audiences and who must walk on his hands, he literally sees the world upside down. Since he is forced to lipread, he does not understand everything that is said around him. Yet trapped within that body is a very sensitive and intelligent soul who sympathizes with others and tries very hard not to be bitter and self-pitying about his lot. In his precarious situation he finds meaning in the ritual of physical training for his shows. For him too the disciplining of his body is in essence the disciplining of his spirit. He loves his workouts because "finally, the thing about a real workout is that you know you're going to meet pain, and the only question is how you're going to be able to handle it."<sup>16</sup> Essentially, he is an artist of admirable integrity and devotion, and it is significant that his act consists of balancing, for he is desperately attempting to maintain balance in his grotesque-seeming life.

Into the peaceable male kingdom where he lives and trains comes Hester, a "normal" who brings with her the gypsy's curse, which is translated: "Find a cunt that fits you and you'll never be the same. Never find any peace" (*GC*, p. 77). Marvin loves her and in his desire for the normality she supposedly possesses will do anything for her. Yet the irony underlying the novel is that in fact she is a far less complete person than he. Unlike Marvin, whose life does have some meaning, she lives the desperately empty, bored life of modern man. She confesses to him near the end of the novel, "All I'm trying to do is stay alive. When everything starts to die, I get this dreadful loneliness. No, not lonely. Alone. Like I was the only one in the world. . . . That's when I . . . well, when I have to change things. I just have to" (*GC*, p. 179). Invading the gym and disrupting the order there with her aggressive sexuality, setting the men against one another, she is simply trying to make her life "interesting."

Marvin's love for her is his curse, his fate, and it upsets the balance which he has painfully brought to his life. In effect, she causes the death of Al, Marvin's father figure, and flaunts her power over Marvin by being unfaithful to him. Powerless, unable to escape his fate, Marvin finally kills her. He later discovers that in fact he acted just as she wanted him to and that he has fulfilled the gypsy's curse, for an entry in her diary reads: "Someday I'll find somebody who loves me enough to kill me. And someday I'll find somebody I admire enough to make him do it" (*GC*, p. 208). In her world love is inextricably linked with power, disruption, and death. This novel continues the reaction against love shown in *The Hawk Is Dying*. In fact, Marvin's murder of Hester purifies the world of contamination, which allows him to regain his perilous equilibrium. In prison at the end, he yet hopes to work out in the prison gym, to continue the ritual of discipline and control so important to his life, though now in much reduced circumstances.

In his latest novel, *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), Crews returns to rural Georgia, a town suggestively named Mystic, for his most desperate and hopeless work yet. The life of the characters is very primitive—in fact, the animals in the book are described as having more beauty than the people—and life is unrelentingly brutal. The brutality is characteristic not simply of rural life, however. The occasion of the

novel is the yearly rattlesnake roundup in Mystic, which draws tourists from all over the country. They are attracted by the ritual of hunting and killing snakes, and as the novel progresses the violence in their obsession with snakes comes closer and closer to the surface until it finally spills over in rioting and mayhem.

While in his previous novels some ritual form of self-control was available to channel potential violence and drain off the threat, here such outlets are non-existent. Joe Lon Mackey, the central character, is a former star high school football player who, because he is virtually illiterate, could not attend college. Now about twenty-one, saddled with a ruined wife and two babies, and lacking the outlet of football, he senses his life going completely out of control. He tries informal competitive weight lifting but feels with a sinking despair: "*What am I doing here on my back? What is this I'm doing? I'm a grown man with two babies and a wife and I'm out here fucking around with weights. What the hell ails me?*"<sup>17</sup> Life is closing in on him, for he cannot reconcile his former aspirations and his extremely reduced present circumstances.

Love offers no relief. His wife represents to him all life's limitations, and while he feels ashamed, knowing that she is not to blame, he cannot abide her and the children. The other women in his life are baton twirlers, cheerleaders, and former beauty queens, for whom love has been reduced to competitive sex and who are just as desirous of brutality as the men. The world offers no redeeming love or tenderness. Joe Lon carries George Gattling's attitude toward love to its extreme: "He did not know what love was. And he did not know what good it was. But he knew he carried it around with him, a scabrous spot of rot, of contagion, for which there was no cure. . . . And it had ruined his life. Not now, not in this moment. Long before. . . . Love seemed to mess up everything. It *had* messed up everything" (*FS*, pp.117-18). With such knowledge, where is salvation? There is none, though religion reappears in the form of a preacher with a snake-worshipping cult, who inspires in Joe Lon awe and fear. Joe Lon only finds release in killing, and in a sense his murderous rampage at the end of the novel is to be viewed with sympathy because, unlike the other characters, he at least attains self-knowledge and admits his fate. "He knew and accepted for the first time that things would not be different tomorrow. Or ever. Things got different for some people. But for some they did not. There were a lot of things you could do though. One of them was to go nuts trying to pretend things would someday be different. That was one of the things he did not intend to do" (*FS*, p. 170). The novel ends apocalyptically with his murdering four people before he is himself killed by an enraged mob. But while he is killing, "he felt better than he had ever felt in his life. Christ, it was good to be in control again" (*FS*, p. 176). To this has the possibility of control been reduced in Crews's latest novel. No ritual, no equilibrium, no balance seems possible. Hope is nonexistent; the only redemption lies in accepting the truth. And the terrifying truth is that we are all potentially murderous grotesques. Crews has elaborated on this idea in a fascinating 1977 *Esquire* article. In Austin, Texas, he found himself obsessed with the memory of Charles Whitman, the disturbed young man who killed twelve people from the tower of the university campus. He observes: "What I know is that all over the surface of the earth where humankind

exists men and women are resisting climbing the tower. All of us have our towers to climb. Some are worse than others, but to deny that you have your tower to climb and that you must resist it or succumb to the temptation to do it, to deny that is done at the peril of your heart and mind."<sup>18</sup> Looking at his novels in sequence, one can see that the hope they offer has been gradually reduced, that the sustaining role ritual can play has diminished, and that the arena in which man can constructively act has become narrower and narrower until it virtually disappears.

The world of Harry Crews's novels is mysterious, violent, and dangerous. His characters, by nature physically or spiritually grotesque, are often ruled by an obsession or instinct for something higher than simply physical life. Almost always their desires are frustrated because of man's radical imperfection. Individual will and discipline and adherence to ritual may perhaps enable one to attain some kind of control over life, but such control is always tenuous, given the facts of existence and human nature. His vision is a lonely and extremely sad one; the more recent novels strongly suggest that human love is inadequate. Trapped within his own nature, each individual must desperately attempt to find a solution for himself. Perhaps the essence of his vision is suggested by the epigraph to his recent autobiography: "Survival is triumph enough." For survival itself is never a certain prospect in Crews's world. He has described in *A Childhood* how he himself has coped. He learned that "every single thing in the world was full of mystery and awesome power. And it was only by right ways of doing things—ritual ways—that kept any of us safe. Making stories about them was not so that we could understand them but so that we could live with them."<sup>19</sup> Storytelling is thus a means of artistic control over the world, an inscrutable world threatening at every moment to overwhelm. The novels are very powerful evocations of the plight of characters without Crews's imaginative capacities who, with at best only limited success, try to find a way of ritualistically controlling their lives and living in a world devoid of ultimate meaning.



### 3. Postmodern Georgia Scenes: Harry Crews and the Southern Tradition in Fiction

William M. Moss

At the outset of any consideration of Harry Crews in the Southern tradition of fiction, one perhaps owes it to that author to grant that Harry Crews himself has made quite clear on several occasions that he does not think of himself as a Southern novelist and, in fact, prefers no "adjective put in front of the word 'novelist.'" <sup>1</sup> That disclaimer itself, however, places him squarely in a venerable Southern tradition. As Flannery O'Connor stated it, "The woods are full of regional writers, and it is the great horror of every serious Southern writer that he will become one of them."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the best place, then, to begin a consideration of Crews's place in any tradition is in his fullest and most explicit denial of that place. To Joe David Bellamy's question, "Do you see yourself as part of any literary tradition, part of a Southern tradition or an experimental tradition?" the novelist (note absence of adjectives) replied at some length:

I've never really been comfortable with schools of writing or . . . the idea of myself as part of some tradition. The tradition I'm part of is that of storytelling. I don't think of myself as a Southern novelist. I certainly don't think of myself as an experimental novelist. As a matter of fact, if anything, I think of myself as a very traditional storyteller. . . . Obviously, I live in the South and I am from the South. Just as obviously, it has not been just Southerners who have been influenced by people like Faulkner. . . . Obviously again, I work out of the conditions of the South, primarily Georgia and North Florida—those cadences of speech, that weather, that whole thing. Not many people know it, but North Florida is the same place as Georgia. Now, South Florida's another thing that I don't understand at all.<sup>3</sup>

This very denial suggests several ways in which Harry Crews is, at least superficially, both traditional and Southern.

On the immediate surface is that tradition of storytelling, a tradition in itself largely Southern. When we think of Hawthorne, Melville, Howells, James, Wharton,

Crane, Norris, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Bellow, Updike, Pynchon, and other writers outside the South, the term "storyteller" is not likely immediately to occur to us. The incongruity in that list of such names as Twain, Cable, Harris, Chesnutt, Faulkner, Wolfe, Warren, Welty, and O'Connor suggests that the distinction is more than merely arbitrary. At least from the time of the Southwestern humorists, Southern literature has been the domain of the yarn spinner, the teller of tales. "When I was a boy," Crews recalls, "stories were conversation and conversation was stories. For me it was a time of magic." And his own fascination with such memories, according to him, "says a great deal about the people and the place I come from. Nothing is allowed to die in a society of storytelling people."<sup>4</sup> It is the storytelling on Southern porches that Faulkner recalls as an important part of his own origins as storyteller. It is a tradition so recognizably Southern that Walker Percy, in making the traditional denial of Southernness and of the influence of Faulkner, feels called upon to deny recalling any such tale-telling from his own childhood.

Of the importance of tale-telling in his childhood, Crews tells us, "Since where we lived and how we lived was almost hermetically sealed from everything and everybody else, fabrication became a way of life. Making up stories, it seems to me now, was not only a way for us to understand the way we lived but also a defense against it" (AC, p. 57). The people of Bacon County, Georgia, made up stories about the mysterious things of their world, "not so that we could understand them but so we could live with them" (AC, p. 90). The best of Southern writing has always attempted to cope with the world's mysteries in a very particular context—in "an almost hermetically sealed" realm of experience. As Crews observes, North Florida and South Florida are altogether different things.

According to Flannery O'Connor, "The country that the writer is concerned with in the most objective way is, of course, the region that most immediately surrounds him, or simply the country, with its body of manners, that he knows well enough to employ."<sup>5</sup> As Crews puts it, "you write out of the manners of your people and the customs of your people, and that is all you've got."<sup>6</sup> We do not miss Illinois in Hemingway's Spain and Italy or in Dos Passos's Manhattan, nor Minnesota in Fitzgerald's Long Island (however much Nick Carraway might). But Faulkner had to fail in Georgia and in Louisiana before he discovered "that little postage stamp of soil" where his genius took surest root. For the Southern writer, "the region that most immediately surrounds him"—the radius within which the universal human mysteries take on their most palpable and compelling form—is likely to be tightly circumscribed indeed.

In one attempt to evade that label of "Southern novelist," Crews admits, "It's true that I come out of the South, and because of that, *maybe*, I have some sense of place—of a *certain, particular* place." Our sense of the centrality of that "*certain, particular* place" to so much of Southern writing and to that of Crews himself is only heightened when he continues, in an attempt to qualify that admission, "But then I suppose John Updike has a certain sense of place in Pennsylvania. . . ."<sup>7</sup> It strikes us immediately, doesn't it, that it just ain't the same thing at all.

And Harry Crews the novelist reveals, despite the assertion of Harry Crews the

interviewee, that North Florida is not at all "the same place as Georgia"—that, in fact (and perhaps more so in fiction), Bacon County is not the same place as any other. The interviewee forgot what the child had somehow known: that "the St. Mary's River was a border that went beyond fascination," a boundary "*all the time keeping everything that was Georgia away from everything that was Florida,*" that even "the Little Satilla . . . separating Appling County from Bacon, made me feel safe and good when I started to sleep at night, knowing that it was keeping all of us in and all of them out" (*AC*, p. 127). To Andrew Lytle, Crews recalls having said, "We both say we're Southerners, but you're a Southerner, I'm not a Southerner." In the same interview he says of his fellow rural-South-Georgian Jimmy Carter, "We're both from the South, though; well, we ain't from the South. He's . . . ain't a tenant farmer's son; I am. I'm not badmouthin' him or tenant farmers, I'm just stating a truth."<sup>8</sup> The truth is that there are many Southern experiences, and the usable background of the Southern writer is, in many cases, limited to a very particular experience in a very particular place.

In *A Childhood* Harry Crews clearly identifies that place for him:

But whatever I am has its source back there in Bacon County, from which I left when I was seventeen years old . . . and to which I never returned to live. I have always known, though, that part of me never left, could never leave, the place where I was born and, further, that what has been most significant in my life had all taken place by the time I was six years old. (p. 4)

From that part of him—that part of his experience—Harry Crews's finest writing has taken form and substance. Whenever his fiction, his imagination, has crossed that mysterious boundary, whenever it leaves Bacon County for North Florida (whatever it might gain in technical virtuosity), it leaves behind something essential, something that makes it tell.<sup>9</sup> His best novels, his first and his latest, *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes*, are the most firmly rooted in that source of whatever he is. The one work that may excel those novels—perhaps the very best thing that he has written—is *A Childhood: the biography of a place*, the biography of Bacon County, Georgia, a very particular place.

One can hardly mention the cliché of the sense of place in Southern fiction without noting the concomitant cliché of the current threat to that sense of place, of its impending disappearance. Crews describes his autobiography as "the biography of a childhood which necessarily is the biography of a place, a way of life gone forever out of the world" (*AC*, p. 4). Elsewhere he speaks of the way of life that is taking the place of that disappearing one:

Obviously, there is a new South, because there is a new everything. That's a cliché. We know that . . . I'm just saying that all those things which identified the South—a kind of loyalty to blood, and a suspicion of the outsider, and a nurturing of familiar things, and a rejection of unfamiliar things—have all broken down. And that's all gone by the way, and it's foolish to say or think otherwise.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Frank W. Shelton finds Crews "a suggestive instance of a Southern writing at a time when regional distinctiveness is on the wane. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

But, as Flannery O'Connor noted in 1957, "The anguish that most of us [Southern writers] have observed for some time now has been caused not be the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country. . . ." Or as another Southern writer complained of his Virginia, "This good Neighborhood has of late been much depraved . . . and Friendship, Hospitality, and Good-Neighborhood, have been extremely discouraged." That was Robert Beverley in 1705. John Pendleton Kennedy's 1851 observation of the encroachments of "a uniformity which is visibly effacing all local differences" <sup>12</sup> is but another of a host of examples of perhaps the most enduring of Southern traditions: that traditional Southern sense of the loss of tradition—that enduring Southern fear that the South will not endure.

Along with that strong sense of home place in Southern literature, then, is the acute sense that that place is no more. Thomas Wolfe was by no means the first Southern author to discover that, central to experience and imagination though home might be, you can't get there from here and now. Of his fellow Mississippian William A. Percy the young William Faulkner wrote, "Mr. Percy—like alas! how many of us—suffered the misfortune of having been born out of his time . . . he is a mixture of passionate adoration of beauty and as passionate a despair and disgust with its manifestations and accessories in the human race." <sup>13</sup> This sense of dislocation—that painful knowledge that, in the words of *The Gospel Singer's* Didymus, "You can't go home! Nobody can go home! Because the world is not our home . . ." <sup>14</sup>—is at the core of much of Harry Crews's fiction. While insisting, "I have never purposely made my lead characters alienated males," the author admits, "But I have, of necessity, been alien to the place I have found myself since I was very, very young." "Never," he recalls in *A Childhood*, has he been "of anywhere, really." Even in claiming Bacon County as his home place, he knows, "there is nowhere I can think of as the home place." And the home that he has "had to make do with" he knows to be "a place, a way of life gone forever out of the world" (*AC*, pp. 21, 14, 4).

This sense of dislocation is itself a source of a powerful tradition in Southern fiction: the element of the grotesque. The violence and distortion of the grotesque, more vital in Southern writing than any bucolic vision of rural experience, appears at least as early as 1708 in Ebenezer Cooke's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, with its disdainful view of Maryland planters:

Figures so strange, no God design'd,  
To be a part of Humane Kind:  
But wanton Nature, void of Rest,  
Moulded the brittle Clay in Jest. <sup>15</sup>

A persistent undercurrent in antebellum Southern literature, most prominent in the writings of the Southwestern humorists, this vision has become a dominant characteristic of much of twentieth-century Southern writing, most notably that

of Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor. In his relation to that tradition of the grotesque, we find both Crews's most obvious link to his Southern precursors and some significant distinctions that set him apart<sup>16</sup>—elements that give to his fiction much of its disturbing power.

The Southwestern humorists adopted two characteristic methods of handling the grotesque that have been followed consistently by their modern successors. When Augustus Baldwin Longstreet describes the clay-eating Ransy Sniffle, of "The Fight," in *Georgia Scenes*, as having "a complexion that a corpse would have disdained to own, and an abdominal rotundity that was quite unprepossessing,"<sup>17</sup> his diction alone assures us that the narrator is by no means of the people whom he is describing—no more than the Englishman Ebenezer Cooke is of the Maryland sowed planters or the Englishman and Virginian William Byrd II is of the porcine Lubberlanders of North Carolina. He is one of *us* observing and commenting upon *them*, deviants from a cultural standard shared by Longstreet and his readers.

And the grotesque condition of these deviants is remediable by specific and available means. "Thanks to the Christian religion, to schools, colleges, and benevolent associations," Longstreet tells us at the end of "The Fight," "such scenes of barbarism and cruelty as that which I have been just describing are now of rare occurrence, though they may still be occasionally met with in some of the new counties. Wherever they prevail, they are a disgrace to that community."<sup>18</sup> Religion and social reform, then, can straighten out those freaks. Their violence and grotesquerie are readily recognized as distortions from the norms of both reader and writer; they are disturbing but understandable—and ultimately correctible.

In a recent treatment of this tradition, appropriately titled "Detached Laughter in the South," C. Hugh Holman summarized some common characteristics of its practitioners:

The writer, either in his own person or through a narrative persona, usually belongs to a social class quite different from and superior to that of the frontier wild life which he describes, and he remains constantly the outsider and the observer who brings to bear upon the subjects of his portrayal a set of standards, a level of culture, and a facility with language quite out of keeping with the subjects being described. Each of these narrators depends upon this social and cultural distance to make possible the representation of crudities, cruelties, and depravities that would otherwise have been shocking almost beyond the bearing to the reader to whom the work is addressed.<sup>19</sup>

As Holman, as well as Louise Gossett and Richard Gray, has observed, this distancing remains a consistent characteristic of the handling of the grotesque by Erskine Caldwell and by Flannery O'Connor, two writers for whom Crews has expressed great respect and the two writers with whom he is most often compared.<sup>20</sup>

The grotesquerie and violence of Caldwell's world and of O'Connor's, like those of Longstreet's, are recognizably abnormal, distorted—and remediable, either in this world or the next. For Caldwell the cause of distortion is economic and sociological, as is its cure. In *Tragic Ground* Jim Howard puts "all the blame on Poor

Boy," the dilapidated ghetto of displaced workers. As he explains to the agent of the Welfare Department, "The finest folks in the world would get mean and bad if they had to live in a place like this." In *Tobacco Road* the narrator himself offers the remedy for the plight of the Jeeter Lesters of the South in the reform of their landlords: "An intelligent use of [Captain John's] land, stocks and implements would have enabled Jeeter, and scores of others who had become dependent on Captain John, to raise crops to be sold at a profit." For Caldwell the solution to the "economic slavery" of the Southern poor white lay in land reform. His caricatures of "people oppressed to hopelessness and impoverished to hopelessness" are in large part intended to raise the consciousness of readers neither oppressed nor impoverished. "When this social condition no longer exists," he declares, "I'll feel there is no longer any purpose in writing about the effects of poverty on the human spirit."<sup>21</sup> As Kenneth Burke observes in "Caldwell: Maker of Grotesques," "Insofar as he is moved by the need of salvation, he seems minded to find it in the alignments of political exhortation, by striving mainly to see that we and he take the right side of matters of social justice."<sup>22</sup>

With no such social or secular concern, O'Connor sees the human condition as no less remediable; she is indeed "moved by the need of salvation." For her, too, the grotesque is a departure or displacement from an accepted standard. "To be able to recognize a freak," she writes, "you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological." Her freaks are recognizably not whole, but distorted in that they possess "little—or at least a distorted—sense of spiritual purposes." The perspective from which she views them, and to which she attempts to bring her reader, is "the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that." "Distortion," in her hands, then, "is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief." Thus, she presents man "as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace . . . so that a door is always open to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul."<sup>23</sup> For her grotesques Christ, not land reform, is the answer.

Harry Crews might well be expected to share the vision of one or the other of these authors, since their influence is pervasive and his admiration of them explicit. Caldwell, he maintains, "is a helluva lot better than he's ever given credit for. Mr. Caldwell is much, much better than his peers."<sup>24</sup> Crews's frequent references to O'Connor in his interviews bear out his considerable admiration for and familiarity with both her fiction and her writings on writing. Of one of her comments on the writer's craft, he exclaims, "That's *fine!* That's fine. And you can't do it much better than that."<sup>25</sup> In his fiction that familiarity is evident. The imagery in *A Feast of Snakes*—"blue empty pieces of sky" and "wall of dark pine"<sup>26</sup> is familiar enough to O'Connor's readers. When George Gattling informs his mother, in *The Hawk Is Dying*, that even the Prince of Wales stood before his falconer, she replies, "It was a long time ago, . . . and they weren't our kind of people." The source of that retort seems apparent in the response of Mrs. Crater, of "The Life You Save May Be Your

Own," when Mr. Shiftlet tells her that "the monks of old slept in their coffins!": "They wasn't as advanced as we are," the old woman said."<sup>27</sup> Crews's reference, in an interview, to "those monasteries where the monks slept in their coffins"<sup>28</sup> leaves little doubt of his borrowing, whether conscious or unconscious.

For all his association with the tradition of the Southern grotesque and especially with these two notable modern writers of that tradition, however, Crews departs significantly from that tradition; he shares the vision neither of Caldwell nor of O'Connor. His characters are to be measured by neither a sociological nor a theological standard. Neither in his world nor beyond it do we sense the presence of that "door . . . open to possibility."

In the city, Crews observes, George Gattling is "defeated . . . by the society he finds himself in." But the author offers no pastoral alternative as he immediately adds, "The rural life, as I knew and experienced it in childhood, is, without exception, dreadful. . . . This is just the way the world is. . . ."<sup>29</sup> As Richard Hognut, the TV newsman of *The Gospel Singer*, has learned, "there is nothing so predictable as the ritual of catastrophe and tragedy. . . . So by now he knew that there was nothing so monotonous in its sameness as man's vice" (*GS*, p. 241). Crews's characters may well be creatures of their environment, but he offers no suggestion that any environment is likely to be much better than another. New York, Dolly Furgeson discovered, "was Garden Hills all over again."<sup>30</sup> His focus is not on that environment nor on any particular social structure, but on "people and their predicament in the world." "When I start out to write fiction," says the author, "I don't start out to dramatize a message, or a social insight, or an economic imperative. I simply start out to get in touch with another life, another guy somewhere in his circumstances, doing the best he can with what he's got."<sup>31</sup> That best is seldom enough. To Marvin Molar's plea "I do the best I can" Hester replies, "Who cares if something's the best if you can't stand it?"<sup>32</sup>

As for amelioration of those circumstances, in one hand one can "try," as in *The Gospel Singer* (p. 102); "hope," as in *The Hawk Is Dying* (p. 120); "seem," as in *The Gypsy's Curse* (p. 174); or "wish," as in *A Feast of Snakes* (p. 161) and *A Childhood* (p. 126): the other hand almost surely "fills up first." For, as Marvin Molar observes, "The world is a very shitty place" (*GC*, p. 52)—as George Gattling puts it, "full of shit" (*HID*, p. 29). And no political, economic, or sociological adjustments are likely to clean it up, or even to cover its smell.<sup>33</sup> "I'm not political," says Marvin. "I don't give a shit about it one way or another, and I know practically nobody else does either, but I'm just trying to explain how what happened happened. Not that it'll make any difference. I know that" (*GC*, p. 166). Joe Lon Mackey, of *A Feast of Snakes*, finally "knew and accepted . . . that things would not be different tomorrow. Or ever" (pp. 158-59). The possibility of escape from this all-too-human condition is perhaps best summed up by Betty of *The Hawk Is Dying*: "The extinct list seems to be the only way to get off the endangered one" (p. 172). "What is left" at the end of failure, Crews observed to David Jeffrey and Donald Noble, "is what all of us are going to get, a chance to know what it's like to die."<sup>34</sup>

But if this world offers little in the way of a home, Crews also suggests that

*This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven.* Little more seems to await than "at the end of the road the worms for your eyes." His borrowings from O'Connor are generally stripped of their religious import. The memento mori may be very real for him, but it means only itself; it points to little after death. Even while denying his atheism or agnosticism, he reduces the emblem of unworldliness to one of mere mortality:

And if I was in one of those monasteries where the monks slept in their coffins, I'd be right in there sleeping. But I don't have to sleep in my coffin. Some of us know the ground we're going into, and some of us have already . . . had the worms in our eyes, and the rest of it, so, after you've had that . . . you don't need to go to church; you've already been, and got everything they've got to give you. All you've got to do is wait and see how it turns out.<sup>35</sup>

Although in this interview he praises O'Connor's view that "the writer is interested in the mystery of [his] subject, which he cannot hope to solve but only to deepen" (p. 141), he does not share her notion of that mystery, the central Christian mystery that shapes her work. Rather, his is the mystery of the unknown and unknowable. "Give [the fiction writer] something that he does not understand," says Crews, "and he'll write a story about it. He feels compelled to deal with mystery, to handle it, walk around it, pry into it, impose some kind of order upon it. . . ."<sup>36</sup>

He may call himself a believer and fill his novels with characters desperately in need of belief, but that need is fulfilled ludicrously if at all. The only "sacrament" that Herman Bledsoe of *Car* can "take upon his tongue" is "the hood of the Maverick car."<sup>37</sup> The Gospel Singer's brother Gerd, like the residents of Axel's "Senior Club," dreams of a "Hollywood heaven where Rock Hudson and Doris Day, sweatless, bloodless, hurtless, sat on either hand of God" (*GS*, p. 35). The residents of Garden Hills await the second coming of Jack O'Boylan, but settle for Dolly. Lazarus, of *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, a regular worshiper before the television set, finds the Buick "*something to believe in*" and wears an "*I'm a believer*" button from the Amoco station.<sup>38</sup> In the depth of his unbelief George Gattling has no doubt of the need for belief: "You ask nothing when you're born; you ask nothing when you die. Everything in between is suffering. Because God works in mysterious ways. How beautiful it all was, he thought, if you could believe it. How terrifying it all was if you could not" (*HID*, 147-48). The problem for this world of believers is stated succinctly enough by *Karate*'s John Kaimon-like Crews himself, a self-proclaimed "world's champion believer":<sup>39</sup> "What does a believer do when there is nothing to believe?" (*KTS*, p. 208).

This author, then, views the world from no social or religious platform. He recognizes the failure of his own closest approach to "social protest fiction" in *Car*<sup>40</sup> and makes clear his distaste for the thesis novel:

Messages are best left to Western Union. If you want social reform, stand for public office. If you want to demonstrate how much you know, write



an essay for a learned journal. If you want to preach, get a pulpit. But if you want to write fiction, focus your eye, mind and imagination upon a man, an individual man who must, as we all do, deal with those abstract nouns . . . love and compassion and pity and honor and hope.<sup>41</sup>

"Every novel," he allows, "will make an economic statement because the people in them have to get their bread somehow. And every novel will make a theological statement, and on and on." But the labeling of his works as "thesis novels or tract novels," he insists, causes him "real honest-to-God pain. Because I don't believe it's fair and I don't believe it's true, and I believe it comes out of a superficial reading." He denounces any fiction in which "the subject comes before the people," in which "the subject doesn't come out of the people and their predicament in the world."<sup>42</sup>

Crews's subject is the human condition itself, the outrageous folly and fear of "people and their predicament in the world." For Fat Man, as for so many of Crews's characters, "life was one outrage after another" (*NGH*, p. 195). As Crews early discovered for himself, all too often "being alive was like being awake in a nightmare" (*AC*, p. 108). Thus, in his fiction, rage and madness are never far beneath the surface, and the common sound is the scream. Envyng the mindlessness of his nephew Fred, George Gattling wistfully speculates, "How wonderful it would be to have that kind of wall around you. A wall of unreason that could not be penetrated. It seemed the only freedom" (*HID*, p. 42). Only in such a state is escape to be found, or in "the last inviolate sanctuary of death" (*HID*, p. 12).

Toward that inevitable end move the events of life and of fiction. Marvin Molar observes of *The Power and the Glory* (a favorite of Crews), "The lieutenant always gets the priest" (*GC*, p. 70). Similarly, the homosexual hotel clerk of *Naked in Garden Hills*, says of *In Cold Blood*, "I keep going back, reading slower and slower, because I just can't stand to know how it all comes out in the end." As Dolly recalls of him, however, "But I guess you can just stall a thing off so long, and then you got to come to the end, see how it turns out. And he did. They found him and his lover dead of the sleeping pills. Both of them nice boys from Scott's Bluff, Nebraska" (*NGH*, p. 198). Life, like that blatant banner welcoming the Gospel Singer, is "anchored at one end to Harvey's Seed store and at the other end to Enigma Funeral Parlor." In that funeral polar "a heart-shaped, pasteboard fan with the face of Jesus on it" serves to keep the blowflies from the head. And on the wall, beneath another head of Christ, with its "dead walnut-colored eyes," is a "two year-old calendar" and "like a caption to a cartoon, . . . BUY BETTER FERTILIZER FROM HARVEY'S ENIGMA SEED in red letters" (*GS*, pp. 10, 21-22). As the first sentence of the first chapter of Crews's first novel tells us, "Enigma, Georgia, was a dead end."

That inescapable enigma is general. "There are Enigmas all over this country," Foot tells the Gospel Singer, "all over the world, and men everywhere are struggling to get out of them" (*GS*, pp. 207-8). Again, "Garden Hills was an ordinary place in an ordinary world" (*NGH*, p. 48). Perfection is to be found only in Doris Day movies or in the Sears catalogue, the secrets of which Crews early intuited: "Young as I was, though, I had known for a long time that it was all a lie. I knew that under

those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world" (*AC*, p. 54).

Such a world offers no norm, no stance from which to look down on its outrageousness. It offers no sanctuary to which to flee, nor even a specific threat from which to flee. Marvin recognizes that, in bringing Hester into the gym, he "was trying to change something that couldn't be changed." Perhaps even worse, he realizes that "what it was I was trying to change I couldn't figure out" (*GC*, p. 77). In his fear Joe Lon Mackey realizes that "it was not any one thing that scared him. It was everything. It was his life. His life terrified him" (*FS*, p. 150). But the urge to flee such terror is doubly futile: "He wished to God he could escape. But he didn't know where he could go or what he wanted to escape from" (p. 103).

In such a grotesque world there really are no freaks; in such a monstrous world there are no monsters. Crews's vision is of that so-called postmodern world, characterized by Jorge Luis Borges as "the labyrinth without the minotaur." In an interview with L. S. Dembo, Borges explained, ". . . if there's no minotaur, then the whole thing is incredible. You have a monstrous building built around a monster, and that in a sense is logical. But if there is no monster, then the whole thing is senseless, and that would be the case for the universe, for all we know."<sup>43</sup> Such seems indeed the case for Crews's monstrous, monsterless world. In *Naked in Garden Hills* Jester asks, "What could a man do when there was no cause? What defense was possible?" (p. 43). And Crews himself writes of his own feeling of terror: "Terrified. Terrified almost beyond terror because it has no name and was sourceless" (*AC*, p. 55).

If there is a monster in Crews's minotaurless labyrinth, it is that most terrible and inescapable monster man himself—that which the author describes as the fascinating "animal in us, the flesh-tearing, brutal animal in us," that which any man may become, "a thing that none of us can be proud of or pleased with (and I think it's in all of us)."<sup>44</sup> After her search Dolly tells Fat Man of her discovery: "It took a long time to find it out. But the truth is—I'm Jack O'Boylan. . . . And you're Jack O'Boylan—everybody is. Jack O'Boylan is a thing in all of us that eats raw meat and drinks blood" (*NGH*, p. 159).

The thing most to be feared is not what might come to one but what one might come to in himself, not what might be done to one but what one himself is capable of doing. The potential for the coldly murderous end of Joe Lon Mackey, Crews suggests, lies within us all. In "Climbing the Tower" he writes of his meditation on Charles Whitman, who climbed the Texas Tower and "calmly and with incredible accuracy shot mothers and husbands and children, shot them dead because it was in him to do it, because his life and everything that made it had taken him there." The great fear of Crews is not that we might fall victim to a Charles Whitman but that we might become one—that we might release the murderer within ourselves:

What I know is that all over the surface of the earth where humankind exists men and women are resisting climbing the tower. All of us have our towers to climb. Some are worse than others, but to deny that you have your tower to climb and that you must resist it or succumb to the temptation to

do it, to deny that is done at the peril of your heart and mind.

All the way home to Gainesville, I felt that same tenuous diaphanous quality in the way I walked and what I did and what I said. Someone at that moment was climbing his tower, and I could only hope that he would not look down on me. But worse, much worse, I hoped that I would be spared being on the tower myself, because if I believe anything, I believe that the tower is waiting out there. I have no answers as to why it is out there, or even speculations about it, but out there somewhere, around some corner, or in some green meadow, or in some busy street it is. Waiting.<sup>45</sup>

Foremost in his mind as he thought of Whitman, says Crews, "was Goethe's statement 'There is no crime of which I cannot conceive myself guilty' " (*BG*, p. 231).

Thus, accompanying the terror of the human condition is a profound Kafkaesque guilt. Considering the possibility that he might have murdered his nephew, George Gattling wonders, "Did they suspect him of so unspeakable a thing? Or worse, much worse, did he suspect himself? He did not have to think about it to know he did. He suspected himself of everything. And always had" (*HID*, p. 145). Joe Lon Mackey, too, assumes his own guilt, "assumed that he had done *something*, and that he would never find out what it was" (*FS*, p. 53). In "A Night at a Waterfall" Crews tells of his own "anxiety, a crushing, sourceless, terror that things are not right and never will be right again. . . . It is the knowledge that neither man nor God will forgive me for. . . . For who knows what?"<sup>46</sup>

From such a condition there can be no distance. Even in his revulsion at the grotesques that he has encountered, John Kaimon realizes that "he was just like they were." Having raped the woman that he loved, "he knew himself to be one with the Pee Are man who put it to her, and the ladies who fainted in the first row, and yes he would have stoned her—she who was himself" (*KTS*, pp. 190, 194). Crews cannot dissociate himself from even those whom he most condemns. Denouncing the American worship of the automobile, in "The Car," he admits, "The operative word in all this is *we*. It will not do for me to maintain that I have been above it all, that somehow I've managed to remain aloof. . . ." <sup>47</sup>

The difference between Crews's perspective on his people and the traditional Southern writer's view is well-illustrated in the autobiographical writings of Crews and of Caldwell. In *Call It Experience* Caldwell explains, "I had gradually come to realize that I would not be completely satisfied with any of my work until I had written a full-length novel and, moreover, that it was inevitable that the novel was to be concerned with the tenant farmer and sharecropping families I had known in East Georgia." For all his concern for such people, his inability to identify himself with them is clear in the language with which he describes them as he writes: "I felt that I would never be able to write successfully about other people in other places until first I had written the story of the landless and poverty-stricken families on East Georgia sand hills and tobacco roads."<sup>48</sup>

In contrast stands Crews's biography of Bacon County, springing from "the notion that I would someday have to write about it all, but not in the convenient and comfortable metaphors of fiction, which I had been doing for years. It would

have to be done naked, without the disguising distance of the third person pronoun. Only the use of *I*, lovely and terrifying word, would get me to the place where I needed to go" (4C, p. 21). He writes not to do justice to those people of Bacon County but "because I have never been certain of who *I* am" (p. 4). For Crews there can be no distance from "that swamp, all those goddamn mules, all those screwworms that I'd dug out of pigs and all the other beautiful and dreadful and sorry circumstances that had made me the Grit I am and always will be." It is by just those circumstances, he realizes, "that the way I saw the world and man's condition in it would always be exactly and inevitably shaped."<sup>49</sup>

John Seelye is correct in noting that for such people, "for Harry Crews the generic term is 'Grits.'" He may also be right in saying, "His 'Grits' are an American version of Yahoo, ready to form a lynch mob at the drop of a coil of rope."<sup>50</sup> But, if so, they are Yahoos in a world without Houyhnhnms, or a world in which every man finds in himself both Yahoo and Houyhnhnm, petty Lilliputian and grotesque Brobdingnagian.

C. Hugh Holman, in his article mentioned earlier, considers the effect of distance and of loss of distance in the work of William Faulkner:

Neither Faulkner nor his reader regards the bulk of the characters in the Snopes trilogy as on his own cultural level. The things which happen to them are seen as comic rather than terrifying. Humor was among the major means by which Faulkner described his world with accuracy and set it apart from the mainstream while not denying its actuality. When, as happens in *The Mansion*, Faulkner loses the distance which allows him to look without involvement at these characters, when he begins to move in close and understand Flem Snopes, and when he begins to follow Mink Snopes's determination to leave prison and seek revenge upon Flem with some admiration for his determination and persistence—at this point the comedy begins to weaken and the trilogy begins to weaken as well.<sup>51</sup>

The detachment that allows humor, says Holman, "is always bought with a price and for a purpose. In Faulkner's case the price is the lowering of his dark tragic intensity."<sup>52</sup> In a significant alteration of the tradition of the Southern grotesque, Crews somehow manages to have it both ways, to maintain both humor and tragic intensity. The poor whites of Southern fiction have traditionally been portrayed as occupying a somewhat amusing world safely distant from that of both author and reader. Even while we laugh at the likes of Joe Lon Mackey, however, we nervously suspect that Joe Lon occupies a world at no great distance from our own. Without that distance, we are forced to accord him a stature assumed by few such characters in Southern fiction, or in any fiction.

Crews reminds us of the conventional treatment of such characters, as Joe Lon and Beeder watch the Johnny Carson show:

There was a Mexican comic on now, explaining how much fun it had been to grow up in a ghetto in Los Angeles. He made starving, and rats, and broken

plaster, and getting beat on the head by cops just funny as shit. The audience was falling out of their seats. Johnny was wiping tears of laughter out of his eyes. (*FS*, p. 44)

While we, like Johnny's audience, may at times almost literally fall from our seats laughing as we read Crews's fiction, much of our laughter is that uncomfortable sort with which we nervously confront death and decay, the unknown and the all too well known. Crews's is indeed a funny world, "just funny as shit"—exactly that funny.

That we can associated Joe Lon Mackey with a Southern California Chicano suggests that Harry Crews is more than merely a Southern writer. But then none of the really good Southern writers have been merely Southern writers. Crews does write in a recognizably Southern tradition. Viewed in the light of that tradition, his work is, however, something new and disturbing and significant in American writing.

#### 4. The Land and the Ethnic in Crews's Works

Jack Moore

Harry Crews subtitles *A Childhood*, his book of autobiographical reminiscences, "the biography of a place" because, he explains, "the biography of a childhood necessarily is the biography of a place, a way of life, gone forever out of the world."<sup>1</sup> The first "memory" in the book focuses on place and reports a conversation his father supposedly had with a friend in "the middle of the night in the Everglades swamp in 1925" (*AC*, p. 1) ten years before Crews was born. Place is the terrain created by Crews's imagination. It does not dominate that quirky imagination, but it provides a land upon which he can construct the odd blend of intense realism and uproarious, sick, dreamy fabulation that is the secret blend of his artistry. Crews's manic-depressive world of comic, sexual, and sometimes something like spiritual highs and pit-bottom lows (the low of the failed soul finding out there isn't any Hell and no God around, only death and small-town Georgia) is held in place partly by the terrain that stretches in his mind from one story to the next.

I will examine the chief features of that terrain in his novels. Because the map of his fiction, so far, resembles a map of the South, I will also, briefly, note how he employs a few kinds of ethnic characters on that terrain, mainly blacks; his particular use of those characters is one of the things that distinguish him from some other regional novelists.

Sometimes it is interesting to examine a writer not by observing what he does but by noting what he could have done and did not. A writer with as strong a sense of scene as Crews can easily convince us that he is merely reporting reality. Only the nightmare of what his characters do seems distorted in the heat of his vision, but not the firm or mucky ground his grotesques spring from. Yet even looking at the image beginning *A Childhood*, the Everglades swamp, one can see that, while the awful wet heat of the place, the "mosquitoes clotted about their faces thick as a veil and the heavy black flies that crawled over their legs" (p. 2) are real enough and even dominating features of the landscape, there is another Everglades of fantastic beauty — great sweeps of staggeringly vast and calm grasses

speckled with wildly colored, wheeling and crying birds, clumps of lush swampflowers — that one might describe. My point is not that Crews is false as a writer for not sketching this other Everglades of reality, but that as a writer he had alternatives which he chose to ignore in constructing the setting for the story which begins the narrative of his life. He is in the act of creating a landscape to match his life, a suitable place for the characters he will also create.

The territory of Crews's South is generally an unlovely and bitter land, though it is a land he fears and respects and not a place (or places) that he mocks, as he ordinarily does the fabricated world of towns and cities and empty civilization that mankind has jerrybuilt upon it. In *A Childhood* the land of his youth, around Alma, in Bacon County, Georgia, is depicted usually in terms that would make Thomas Wolfe's Old Catawba seem like a Norman Rockwell paradise: "Flat as the map it's drawn on and covered with pine trees and blackjack oak and sand ridges and a few black gum and bay trees (p. 9). . . . The timber in the county was of no consequence, and there was very little rich bottomland. Most of the soil was poor and leached out" (p. 13). Some land his father occupied "was nothing but pine trees and palmetto thickets and stands of gallberry bushes and dog fennel" (p. 33). The weather is usually "hot as only a day can be hot in the middle of an airless field in Georgia," the air "dust-laden" (p. 50). Working land that tough is so difficult that "three years in the Marine Corps had not prepared me for a Georgia summer in a tobacco patch" (p. 170).

Crews's childhood land is no Tom Sawyer world of swimmin' holes and green leafy trees to climb beneath a warm, comforting sun. The Big Harrikin Swamp had "the damndest wall of brambles and briers you ever seen in your life . . . some of 'm big as a scrub oak"; it was a "suckhole swamp," a "waist-deep swamp full of moccasins" (p. 19). Yet (and here he shares an attitude with Huck Finn's creator) it is also a land he frequently feels reverence toward, for its force and its uncontrollable powers, its "weevils in cotton, screwworms in stock" (p. 16). Working in a tobacco field at the conclusion of *A Childhood* and ending his vision of growing up with another image of the strong, unlovely land, Crews looks up and swears at the "Goddamn sun." Immediately he knows what he has done, what act of impiety he has committed. The boys he has worked in the field with also stop laughing and flinch. "I had . . . done" Crews writes, "what, in Bacon County, was unthinkable. I had cursed the sun. And in Bacon County you don't curse the sun or the rain or the land or God. They are all the same thing. To curse any of them is an ultimate blasphemy" (p. 171).

*A Childhood* is autobiographical, but perhaps all biography is simply another version of fiction. The work serves as a revealing introduction to most of Crews's novels since it displays nakedly many of the ways in which, in his earlier novels, he uses the land and the city; in *A Childhood* he writes that "everything everywhere in the city was tainted" (p. 129). His first published novel, *The Gospel Singer*, deals with similar physical and spiritual territory. Tracing the rise, fall, and possible popular apotheosis of a Georgia evangelist from a place so small it can hardly be called a town, the book is Crews's most obviously, though not necessarily his most intensely, religious novel. True religion and not just religious imagery is an

important element of Crews's fiction, much of which traces some kind of religious quest or other for salvation or atonement, though for what (other than being simply human) is not always clear. In *A Childhood* Crews writes, "Hell was at the center of any sermon I had ever heard in Bacon County," Hell and "God and heaven and damnation and the sorry state of the human condition" (p. 65).

Enigma, the chief locale of *The Gospel Singer*, also seems like Hell. Like Crews's childhood place, it is also inescapable. Enigma, Georgia, is also a real town that can be found on a good road map. It is one of those places you suspect no one has ever been, and were you to drive through it, chances are you would probably doubt that it existed after you left. Like so many of the other small places Crews writes about in Georgia (that can also be found on good maps), if you saw it you would sense that it momentarily materialized around the road because there has to be something there beyond the cement or macadam other than void. But Crews knows the inside of these places, and he opens them up in all their rank depravity (though again, in alternative reality, they may very well be the quiet, loveliest little villages of the plain). One of Crews's fairly constant techniques is to insist upon the reality of his places, partly by using real though strange place names like Enigma — or Mystic, Georgia, in *A Feast of Snakes* — and then to distort the reality of the place into one of his warped fables of "the sorry state of the human condition." But unlike Erskine Caldwell, with whom Crews is sometimes compared because they both seem to work the same region with the same comic and violent and sexual sense of the grotesque, traces of a God, though perhaps a fearsome and even sadistic God (the Ultimate Sumbitch), remain throughout Crews's land. Crews is a religious novelist, and Caldwell, despite *God's Little Acre*, was not — he has not that resonance throughout his work though he has a socio-political awareness Crews lacks. Even Faulkner has not, it seems to me, Crews's religious mania, for, though there is strong religious symbolism in Faulkner's work, it often seems (though beautifully crafted) more part of his artistic than of his spiritual identity. The Southern writer whose mean, sacred land Crews's setting seems most like, is Flannery O'Connor, whose mind traveled along some of the same dark highways as Crews's.

Each of Crews's novels is located in a very specific place, and though people come to these places from elsewhere, one always has the sense that, as was true of his home region in *A Childhood*, "where we lived and how we lived was almost hermetically sealed from everything and everybody else" (p. 51). That is, the place of each book possesses a definiteness, with clear boundaries and a distinct physical nature.

The opening words of *The Gospel Singer* declare that "Enigma, Georgia, was a dead end," a scabby patch of civilization barely scraped from the wilderness, stopping "abruptly on the edge of Big Harrikin Swamp."<sup>2</sup> Even the road to it, highway 229 (Crews is also always very precise with his road directions), seems to want to get away from it and "at the far end of town . . . bursts free" but "into the flat burning countryside" where "a mule was hitched in the sparse shade of a chinaberry tree" (*GS*, p. 9). One is made constantly aware throughout the novel that "the town stopped on the edge of the swamp" (*GS*, p. 133), and the



courthouse in the middle of town seems fragile and insubstantial next to the swamp it is so close to. The townspeople also seem to belong more to the swamp than to the courthouse, to what will suck civilization under than to what will deliver and execute its laws. The road runs through the book as something ugly and violent rather than as a symbol of escape from the town or swamp, forming "a daggerpoint that lay against the base of the sky" (*GS*, p. 14), a "naked black vein" (*GS*, p. 38) undulating "in the rising heat," usually "empty" and merging "with the darkening countryside" (*GS*, p. 41).

The town that the Gospel Singer returns to, wealthy but spiritually corrupt (and sick at heart that others do not recognize his corruption, his humanity), is, like Crews's homeland in *A Childhood*, terribly hot. Its horizon is "smoking" (*GS*, p. 14), and there has been no rain for two months. The sun is so hot, its "heat rose out of the earth distorting the town" (*GS*, p. 12), as though to account for the freakish behavior nearly all its inhabitants will display, contorted sinners in some ugly medieval dance of death. The sun possesses no generative force as it "furiously" burns "over Big Harrikin Swamp" (*GS*, p. 35) and its "stunted, swampy cypress" (*GS*, p. 74).

Night brings no relief, only a full moon "raining out of Big Harrikin swamp like the sun" (*GS*, p. 48), a "hot, yellow moon" that seems "to steam where it fell through the window" (*GS*, pp. 73-74). When night ends, the moon "drown[s] in the sky" (*GS*, p. 83). The air is humid and thick with flies, there is no wind, nearly every movement seems an act of violation — headlights become "twin streaks of light" that "impaled the sky in the west" (*GS*, p. 43). Obviously, this is typical wasteland imagery of a maimed, parched land awaiting the king whose death will bring it back to spiritual life. But here, after the Gospel Singer arrives and the rain follows him, the only change seems that the road ruts grow soft. After the pouring rain and the Gospel Singer's death, the town still lies "in oppressive silence under a brassy sky" (*GS*, p. 240). As the Gospel Singer himself had declared earlier, "Nothing ever changes here" (*GS*, p. 49). This will always be a land with spavined hogs, where sound animals cannot be bred, a land of palmettos and dog fennel growing in the yards of the most expensive homes, a land pleasing to the Gospel Singer's scourge Didymus: Didymus (and one suspects the Gospel Singer also) believes that "suffering is God's greatest gift to man" (*GS*, p. 75).

At least two more characteristics of the landscape in *The Gospel Singer* need mentioning, for they point to features in the landscape of the other novels as well. There is a world outside Enigma that people travel to and come from (one scene in dreamy retrospect takes place in New York City, for example), but that world tends to be dominated by nowhere places like Flannery O'Connor's Milledgeville (from whence lumbers the ex-turpentine worker, con man, and minister, Woody Pea), Tifton, and Cordele, Georgia. I call these cities nowhere places not to insult them, for I am sure that people from those towns can proudly recite their histories and glories. As points on the map of public consciousness, however, they are only locations by highways in some Devil's Triangle of imagined boredom, one that the traveler hopes an interstate will circumvent. Even had they in reality beauty or cultural depth, they remain like so many locations in America, blank in our

dreams as Trenton, New Jersey, or Scranton, Pennsylvania, as opposed to the rich, colorful Charlestons, Atlantas, Savannahs. They are places where roads intersect but no beast will ever come slouching from. Crews has a liking for such cities and seems to enjoy the non-poetry of their associations; he fills his books with mention of them. Foot, the freak who follows the Singer's caravan "like Peter followed Jesus" (*GS*, p. 40), with his own honest, profane parody of the Singer's sacred, fraudulent show (symbolizing the interpenetration of sacred and profane which is a recurring theme of Crews's books), first determines to hound the Singer's mission in Tampa, another place with no resounding history in the Old South of public tradition, though it is one of the princesses of the new Sun Belt South, regal as a fourth or fifth runnerup Miss America.

Tifton or Tampa offers a pallid alternative to the horrors of Enigma and its swamp. Another alternative place is the tacky surface of modern civilization blotched with junk that signifies our shoddy new culture, the ornamental pimples on the skin of our sinning carcasses, the junk food we reach for instead of forbidden fruit. On route 41 between Cordele and Tifton, where the Singer has fled to escape the agony of salvation the afflicted of Enigma are beseeching him to offer them, he stops at "Myrtle and Bob's Place," a cafe crammed with "waxpaper-wrapped sandwiches and racks of Zippo Lighters . . . and glittery signs that said: WE DON'T PEE IN YOUR ASH TRAYS – DON'T THROW CIGARETTE BUTTS IN OUR URINAL, and WE DON'T ACCEPT PERSONAL CHECKS – WE STILL HAVE A GOOD SUPPLY LEFT OVER FROM LAST YEAR (*GS*, p. 119). The Singer buys in the cafe "a postcard of a blackhaired girl with a brassiere full of oranges inviting anybody that wanted to to come on down and see her in Florida" (*GS*, p. 123). On the main street of Enigma sits a 1948 Buick with a foxtail tied to its aerial and a "Go Navy" sticker irrelevantly pasted in its rear window. Willalee Bookatee, who has murdered the Singer's sweetheart, his first convert and first woman, watches a Muntz TV that he bought in Albany, Georgia. How right Crews is in his details, though sometimes how obscure, too: how many remember television's earliest days and "Mad Man Muntz's" early, dreadful commercials?

The objects perfectly describe the clutter that fills and perhaps even satisfies the gullet of a culturally and spiritually poverty-stricken society, the garbage that litters its void. The comedy of their appearance often only thinly disguises the human depravity that both disgusts and fascinates Crews: two Good Humor trucks come from Tifton to service the crowds gathered in Enigma for what will be a revival and a double lynching; they play music and read off ice cream flavors while "the street [is] a jammed mass of faces turned up like masks with black open mouths sucking and expelling a collective breath" (*GS*, p. 190). The picture is one of tacky depravity worthy of one of Goya's "Caprices."

*The Gospel Singer* concludes with the Singer dead, a fraud who did not want the people to exploit, to wallow in, his fraudulence. Like a true religious, he did not want to accept the role of savior which the people desired to thrust upon him. The unredeemed of Enigma, Tifton, and Cordele live on. The Singer's talentless brother and sister, off-key, acned, irregularly shaped Osmonds, will glow in the reflection of his shine, but they are only wretched skins without thoughts, without

brains, without spiritual depth. They will tour, in his place, far away from the swamp, and will probably "make a million dollars next year" (GS, p. 248).

*Naked in Garden Hills*, like *The Gospel Singer*, possesses a strong sense of place and a religious orientation that Crews pursues under the surface of his story in painful allegorical detail. The novel's chief locale, Garden Hills, Florida, has been created by the mysterious Jack O'Boylan, who bought the land without ever seeing it, but who, Crews writes with satirical, pseudo-biblical phrasing, "looked, and saw that it was real good" on a geologist's report.<sup>3</sup> O'Boylan sets men to work reshaping the land into a model industrial community, and long after he has left like a departed god, men still work the place, why, "Nobody knows! Nobody knows!" Only "Jack O'Boylan knows, but he's not here and he's not telling" (NGH, p. 47). The book is like a parody of the creation myth, a sort of disjointed allegory where you feel that parallels were worked out and then one list slipped from the matching set of cultural associations just enough to throw the identifications haywire but not so much as to destroy the structure of seeming correspondences. This technique suggests that such correspondences are arbitrary anyway, since the original story is a sham itself, or an artificial construct. Thus, creation becomes a "shaggy dog story" (NGH, p. 109) because it is pointless beyond the activity of itself. Things can fit anywhere: stretched across the bathroom ceiling of the owner of Garden Hills's cathedral-like house is a terrible "tile copy of Michaelangelo's *Creation*. Adam languished, his huge muscles inert, between two recessed fluorescent lamps. And God, his beard whipping in the wind, strained to touch him" (NGH, p. 23).

God created the universe from God's self, and that self was as beautiful as Eden. Garden Hills's mythic history is not nearly so lovely. The white lumps of its land are off route 4 between Orlando and Tampa, two southern cities with no traditional southern associations in the national consciousness. Before the Florida boom, Garden Hills had not even any hills. "It was a ten-mile square of barren soil lying in the middle of the Florida peninsula." The nameless man who bought it during the boom thought Garden Hills would be a good name for it and sent another man there to the place "flat and burning under the Florida sun" (NGH, p. 11) to put up a sign with its name. Later, after a crash and another slight boom, the fabled Jack O'Boylan buys the land with great hope for it and puts men upon the land to work it.

O'Boylan's dreams for the land are based upon geologists' reports that it is rich in phosphates. Bulldozers move the earth into hills, an enormous plant is constructed, the unemployed are given tasks, Buicks are bought, and, ultimately, the town of Garden Hills is constructed from prefabricated houses — at the bottom of a twenty-five acre hole produced by the removal of phosphate soil for the factory in which the town's inhabitants work. "The earth trembled" with machines and the factory "increased of its own will" (NGH, p. 16). And then, all was silence. The factory stopped running, closed. The geologists had erred. The land was profitless.

What remains is the place of the novel, a land mainly without hope, a collection of failures, mostly. The land was bad before the fall, and afterwards it is worse.

A yellow cloud hung low over the earth. A smell like that of burning cloth drifted in from green ponds of stagnant water. . . . On all sides of Phosphate Mountain . . . were mounds of earth the color of potash and partially covered with a ragged fringe of weeds and rusted pieces of machinery. Down the valleys broken strands of barbed wire had fallen between rotted, leaning posts. Metal conveyor belts, corroded and frozen in disuse, lay twisted and broken in the weeds. (NGH, pp. 2-3)

House yards were "bare white. . . . A starved dog with one ear stood in a ditch and did not bark" (NGH, p. 7). The scene is reminiscent of Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes: phosphate dust is everywhere. "His beige trousers were white with phosphate dust. It was in his hair, in his mouth" (NGH, p. 33).

What to do after the fall is the problem of the novel, how to exist in the nothingness that is Garden Hills, a dead white world whose veneer of civilization is once more made of junk: go-slim wafers and Metrecal (swilled down by the disgustingly obese Fat Man); prefabricated mahogany wall panels and Arcilan pile carpets for the wealthy; the literature of Killer Joe Piro (a small, harmless, talentless, briefly flickering celebritoid during a moment in the sixties, known for the dances he created in exclusive discos now long shuttered); television with "the make-believe violence of Dodge City . . . the Brooklyn accent of the Western Hero, the twenty-shot sound of the six-shot revolver" (NGH, p. 155).

Crew seems ambivalent about the possibility of honest hope in such an existence (and who can blame him?). There is a spot of green in Garden Hills: "The Jack O'Boylan Reclamation Park," mass-produced in Peoria, Illinois, and transported to a fifty-truck caravan. The park has grass, flowers, trees, a well and sprinkler system that rains each night; ". . . through the long sweltering, sun-blistered days, when the air turned to ash . . . people would look up and see Reclamation Park, damp and impossibly cool on the horizon. And it would spread to all the hills. It would shelter and sustain them . . . it was an act of faith" (NGH, p. 35). Unfortunately for the hopes of the people, the green pasture never grows any bigger, though neither does it shrink and disappear. The park is another joke, of course; it has been turned into a roadside lunch stop, and, if things work out, will be part of a planned tourist attraction (trap). Still, it is green and moist and there.

The attraction itself is another ambiguous feature of the local landscape. Planned by an ex-Phosphate Queen (Crews has a charming regard for beauty contest winners that he expresses in several books) who, tacky as her imagination may be, refuses to quit hoping. All indications suggest it will be an even more bizarre highway stop than such legendary American shrines (counterparts of Mont St. Michel and Chartres) as "South of the Border" in South Carolina or "Harold's Place" in Reno. Dolly, the Phosphate Queen, appears to have a desire to live fully and no respect whatsoever for the integrity of Garden Hills, which she splashes blood red, even its weeds, with garish paint slopped from the side of the old factory. What she will create on the land seems terrible and obscene — the Fat Man in a disco cage suspended over a dance floor — but it also seems alive. Perhaps this is all the people of Garden Hills can hope for, living over the excreta of dead organisms (the phosphate) between Tampa and Orlando.

Land is less emphasized and certainly less a symbolic or actual force in *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven*, which takes place in Cumseh, Georgia, not too far from Cordele and Albany. Once the land was prosperous enough with "the smell of growing things and wide fields," and "the Gates plantation was the biggest in the State of Georgia"; but "then the drought came. South Georgia turned into an oven. Men woke up in the morning spitting cotton."<sup>4</sup> The dry air turns dusty and swirls "in the moonlight like a misting rain," and the Negroes whose shanties have been bulldozed over for more land stand chanting "under the hot blazing moon" (*TT*, p. 136). Eventually, after the Negroes have been packed off to places like "Adel . . . Ty Ty . . . Enigma . . . and Sycamore" (*TT*, p. 137) nearby, rain comes, and comes. Jake Gates's tractors are left out in the driving rain (the Negroes have taken apart the sheds they were under) and have sunk in the mud beyond recall. So farming, as the novel opens, is no longer the main industry of Cumseh.

Jake Gates's daughter Axel (a.k.a. Pearl Lee) has turned what is left of the farm property into what she calls a "Senior Club," a place old people are put before they die. The landscape of the terrain is dominated by the large, glaring white screen of the Cumseh Drive-In, which stands "like an enormous headstone" (*TT*, p. 146) above Jake Gates's paved-over fields. In fact, the screen which shimmers in the sun giving "back the light like a mirror" (*TT*, p. 120) is a headstone for Jake, for Axel has buried him under the concession stand the Drive-A-Show people have constructed on her father's old ground.

The novel is pervaded by death and how it is dealt with (mainly hypocritically). Like two characters from Melville's *The Confidence Man* (where at points it is difficult to discern in a dialogue who is the confidence man and who the gull), Hiram Peters and Junior Bledsoe exchange emblems: the one, a casket seller whose company promises eternal rest in "Garden Plots," gives out a picture of a grave "with a marble slab crowned with a pink carven angle"; the other, a preacher, distributes a pamphlet titled "There Is No Death" (*TT*, pp. 66-67). No matter what precautions are taken in the Senior Club to hide from the old people their impending deaths, no matter how glibly the preacher denies death and the salesman tries to transform the tomb into a luxury condo (he comes fresh from a sales blitz in "St. Petersburg, Florida, the city of the living dead" (*TT*, p. 13), death, like the great drive-in screen, controls the book's dominion.

What will be shown on the "naked white" screen? A favorite image with Crews, a movie with Doris Day and Rock Hudson (perhaps *Pillow Talk*). The Gospel Singer's scabby brother Gerd had yearned to live beyond "the heat, the drought, and his own bruised, unlovely skin" and watch "Rock Hudson and Doris Day, sweatless, bloodless, hurtless," sitting "on either hand of God" (*GS*, p. 35). What casket could compete with that? In the new junk world of Cumseh with its hernia belts and artificial breasts and artificial church bells which were "a round metal cylinder that played in a machine" (*TT*, p. 27) and its old people who have been turned into the junk of our culture, it is perhaps appropriate that Jack Gates's once fertile fields have become a drive-in theater for the deathless duo, where "empty popcorn sacks and hot-dog wrappers swirled and then swirled again among the rows of metal stands holding the speaker" (*TT*, p. 75).

*Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* is Crews's first novel to take place entirely in an urban context. Land is therefore no force in the book, but place is still significant. Most of the book's action occurs in a narrow strip of territory north of Miami including Dania, Hollywood, and Fort Lauderdale. When Henry James explained the difference between the novel of realism and the novel of romance, he said the balloon of fictive experience was tied more closely to the earth of reality in the realistic novel. In Crews's books the balloon sometimes drifts distantly, but strands of the rope connecting it to earth are made of real place names. Not only are the cities Crews employs in this story real places, but so are the roads, such as U.S. 1, highway A1A, and Interstate 95. Moreover, the cities and roads function thematically and not simply as names lending verisimilitude. Although the northern part of Florida is Southern (centrally), the southern counties of Broward and Dade (roughly from Miami to Fort Lauderdale) he mentions in the book are really not. So it is significant to note that Crews selects as his locale a place where the traditions one would expect to obtain, do not, and where there is, in place of the old rich (and perhaps rank) Southern culture, a variety of cultures, many of them as new and practically as thin as the parking lots and roads which are among their chief architectural features. It is perhaps even significant that he uses somewhat smaller and definitely off-center places such as Dania and Hollywood, which lack Miami's lush, glittery formica-top byzantine quality. That he is precise about the roads that crisscross these cities is only natural since the roads in a sense are the cities, are what has replaced the empty land that the cities once were. The bumper-to-bumper, deafening traffic Crews describes seems a constant element of the landscape, like the sun always hot and burning straight down at noon. "He . . . went out into the sun. . . . The traffic roared on U.S. 1. The sun was straight up now and he walked in the little round spot of his own shadow. Light was everywhere brilliant, concentrated, blinding. It was reflected out of metal, out of white tile roofs, out of the cement blocks of buildings."<sup>5</sup> That is what has replaced the dust or muck of Enigma. That is what the land is like north of Miami.

This is a country of hot parking lots and bright, bleak motels — the novel's Tara is called the Sun 'n Fun Motel. Here train the karateka the book's hero is trying to join. They practice in a dry pool that perhaps parodies the old sacred fount Joseph Campbell memorialized in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It is no wonder that people are no longer in touch with themselves, except perhaps to smear on more suntan lotion.

How you get in touch with yourself (but not become narcissistic) and how you properly get in touch with the people around you, how you bear to live in a terrifying world, seem to me generally the big questions Crews is always getting at in his novels. *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* contains a lot of kung-fu muck that perhaps is meant to be wisdom about how these questions are answered: "What he could not bear before now helped him bear what was not there before." "We can work that out . . . itself. . . . If not, then it will have to be taken care of. See how simple everything becomes" (*KTS*, p. 139). The point of the novel is that the old gods have surely gone, and we are miserable if we cannot find new gods to sustain us in a paved-over, super-highwayed universe trashed with motels. Some source of

spiritual sustenance is necessary when beauty contests become the chief shared ritual of a civilization, when signs on bathroom doors say "SETTERS" and "POINTERS" (*KTS*, p. 69), when the heart of one's epistemology is "*Coke is . . . the real thing*" (*KTS*, p. 197), when faith fixes on "*Buick . . . Something to believe in*" (*KTS*, p. 155).

Oddly, there is a loveliness to the real area Crews has chosen as the novel's locale, one that only rarely is noticed in the book, probably both because the beauty would be unsuitable to the symbolic environment Crews wished to wrap around his characters and because in reality that loveliness (the huge, usually blue sky, the big clear moon — the "Moon over Miami" really is splendid — the clean-looking ocean) has been in part squeezed out by junk piled on top of dredged-up sand and drained-away hammocks. "The sea-stripped Australian pines turned the color of salt by the sun and wind" (*KTS*, p. 15) are mentioned several times in the book's early pages as John Kaimon sheds his old clothes and some of his old ways to join the karateka and a new life. But they rise "stunted" and "chalky" (*KTS*, p. 21) above a thin patch of what was formerly the "nigger beach" littered with Budweiser cans and Sprite bottles, near a strip of land sticking into the water between the ocean and the harbor at Ft. Lauderdale. Elsewhere in the city even what is natural seems incorporated into the artificial, tacky landscape. On the Fourth of July cars with "miniature plastic American flags" are jammed "solid curb to curb" past the Sun 'n Fun Motel, where six homosexuals, one "wearing purple eye shadow," wait "under the make-believe shade of the palm trees" for a karate lesson (*KTS*, pp. 152-53).

What John Kaimon discovers from the karateka and from the miraculous beauty queen and karate master he is raped by and impregnates, such as the new joy he can feel enduring pain, tells him apparently more than he knew before and maybe brings him closer to what his hero William Faulkner knew. But ultimately he leaves the karateka and their motel and presumably the urban society that is violent and dangerous like the land, but, unlike the land, unworthy of respect and inadequate to sustain piety; he lights out on the road. He is one of the survivors in Crews's fiction, and, as the epigraph to *A Childhood* states, "Survival is triumph enough."

Crews's remaining novels expand and deepen his use of land and city to illuminate his characters' search for some way to deal with the generally terrible life and place they find themselves in. Whether the later novels are darker than the earlier ones is debatable. The apocalypse at the end of *The Gospel Singer* seems as agonizing in its way as the slaughter concluding *A Feast of Snakes*, and the cruel but respected terrain in the former novel neither more nor less frightening than the snake-filled hills of *Mystic*, the locale of the latter work. Always Crews packs his books with incidents central to basic American myth (though not the ones usually discussed in textbooks), as, for example, the archetypal sexual fantasy he describes in *Car*: a high school cheerleader tugged by the star fullback who had scored also four touchdowns that day, screwed in his "Vette," the American post-adolescent dream car. Always America is packed with the junk of our cheapened civilized life, and often the land offers as an alternative something wild and dangerous not to love, exactly, but to respect because somehow a spirit — even if a destructive, evil spirit — resides in it.

*Car* mocks our national passion for technology and consumption while displaying at the same time a certain reverence for the car love it satirizes. The place is another city with few traditional associations in the public consciousness, Jacksonville, Florida (yet a place geographically and culturally not too far from Waycross and some other small Georgia towns mentioned in the book, where most of the inhabitants of Jacksonville are presumably from). In Jacksonville "the air was blue . . . a thermal lid enclosed the life of the city, pressing their breathing and the breathing of the racing gasoline engines back upon the streets."<sup>6</sup> Cars, of course, are bumper to bumper in Jacksonville, while outside the city the landscape is a vast auto junkyard with mountains and valleys and caverns of dead, mutilated cars, a region where at one point cars "fall from the sky" (*C*, p. 48) like rain.

The St. Johns River, still one of Florida's tannic splendors where it runs dark and cedary and yet clear through semi-tropical terrain, here is more polluted than U.S. 1 between Jacksonville and St. Augustine (a road of many wrecks). The river is "ten feet of gasoline on top of twenty feet of shit" (*C*, p. 3), smelling like "a blast of gas and chemicals and stopped-up toilets" with a "full cheesy breath" (*C*, p. 48). William Bartram, who wrote of the St. Johns in his *Travels* (1791), would be rightfully appalled at what man has done. In *Car* and elsewhere Crews is far from a Wordsworthian nature lover rhapsodizing over the restorative and educative virtues of the wilderness or of the country. One senses that, if there dwells a spiritual force in the land of Georgia swamps and dusty roads, it is a destructive spirit — but it is a spirit, and it is openly, honestly, naturally destructive.

*The Hawk Is Dying* concerns another search for something to give richness and significance to shallow contemporary life, to gain an honest love, not by eating a car but by training a wild hawk. The novel's protagonist, George, lives in Gainesville, Florida, a boring place of superficiality, Posturepedic mattresses, and formica sinks, with his sister who reads about Rock Hudson and Doris Day in the *Family Weekly*. His life's work at the moment is owning a car upholstery shop where Naugahyde seat covers are carefully fitted over Volkswagen seats. He is a successful businessman in a place where "everything . . . was called University Something: University City Bank, University Enco Service, University Inn, University Express & Delivery Service, University Television Cable Co. Inc."<sup>7</sup> His business is called the University Trim Shop.

Like a cracked Walter Mitty (he is from Bacon County), George stares at requisition forms and dreams of "buzzards sailing out of his childhood" (*HID*, p. 6), of hiding in tall grass at sunup when the mist begins to burn off Payne's Prairie (a real place outside Gainesville off route 41, just where Crews says it is in the book), and of training a wild hawk. And he dreams he is a hawk. He does not like to think too much about controlling the hawk, "to put a hood on the biggest, strongest, and most magnificent raptor in the world . . . to reduce it to something any child could carry" (*HID*, p. 221), but he is willing to do that to get in touch with the hawk, to establish a connection between himself and all the hawk represents.

The meaning of the hawk should not be easy or even possible to determine. Like any simple, complex symbol its ultimate mystery is meant perhaps not to be cracked, for what it represents is the sum total of everything that the meaningless



existence of George in the bland city is not. The hawk surely does not stand for good or evil or intelligence or ignorance. It is a destructive animal that does only one thing well — kill. In its own world it is powerful, but it is far from the most powerful force in that world. It can be trapped by man. Yet it has a wildness to it, a purity of being, a sacredness perhaps. It is a creature not of the city but of Payne's Prairie, where, a commemorative marker informs the tourist, 200,000 years before, a lake covered land, and, 160 years before, Indians dwelled, and were killed by whites. The prairie is one of the few pieces of land described as lovely by Crews. In a "world . . . full of shit" (*HID*, p. 29), it is a reminder of primal beauty. But it is also only two miles from Interstate 75 and "Sonny's Fat Boy's Bar-be-cue." Perhaps it is best not to seek too long to find out what the hawk means, just as George does not want to contemplate his domination, even though only temporary, over it. Perhaps it is best just to know it is "utterly wild" (*HID*, p. 82). Kings gave hawks as gifts (*HID*, p. 126); perhaps that is enough to know.

*The Gypsy's Curse* is the least place-centered of Crews's novels. The book concerns Marvin Molar's search for something fulfilling in life, a search made complicated by his physical grotesqueness (his body is exceptionally powerful but his legs are wasted, and when he gives shopping mall demonstrations of his strength and agility he tucks them like skin flaps under his buttocks).

Areas such as Tampa Bay, Ybor City (in Tampa), Clearwater Beach, and Tarpon Springs, all in close proximity in Florida, are locales for the book's action (though an important minor character is from Bacon County, Georgia), but none is used extensively, either as symbol or physical place. The closest thing to a villain in the book is a Greek from the Greek community of Tarpon Springs, which has a rich ethnic history. Today the place is mostly a tourist attraction whose theme is the departed sponge-fishing industry. Crews had available to him either the real and culturally dense background of the Greek community or its commercialized present-day incarnation (shops filled with bins of sponges and wall racks of shiny, pretty madonnas set in shellacked pink conches), and he used neither.

The area he writes about could be practically anywhere, except that it is warm and has beaches. Perhaps that is his point about the sameness of life in most of America, a land where housewives can buy fake ballerina slippers (as does the juiceless wife of Russell Muscle, the weightlifter) anywhere, at any Woolworth's, in any shopping center. The vision of the novel is Marvin's vision, not necessarily Harry Crews's, and Marvin sees little value in the land. The beaches are the finest, he admits, and "you couldn't ask for a better piece of water" than the Gulf, only "there's not much gash in that part of Florida, and what you are able to find is mostly defective. Mostly old skins . . . really old skins, eighty-five, ninety, like that."<sup>8</sup> The warm sun, pride of the new Sunbelt cities, is for Marvin "a white hole in the sky" (*GC*, p. 205). Nature does not sustain Marvin. Love (or sex) does for a while, but then he is betrayed by love. The pain of a great workout helps, but that kind of pain is limited by human endurance. For Marvin there is no spirit or force in the land around him for him to fear or respect, and at the end of the book no one alive that he can both need and love (he kills the woman in whose "lap" he has found such bliss). In his concluding words he says he is heading for a prison

that perhaps his awful body has directed him toward all along, but a prison it is possible that he, through his own limited and warped vision — in part, a vision reflected back from how the world sees him — has helped to construct.

*The Gypsy's Curse* is also about how close Crews feels love and violence are. *A Feast of Snakes* concerns the proximity of lust, violence, human terribleness, the nothingness of existence, and so many other Crewsian horrors it almost becomes a parody of Crews, but, as *The Sound and the Fury* escapes parody, so does it. Seemingly in complete innocence Crews prefaces his book with the disclaimer that "this is a work of the imagination. . . . Even though there is a real Mystic, Georgia, the town by that name in this book is, itself, an entire fiction."<sup>9</sup> On the map and in the heart Mystic is not far from the Enigma of *The Gospel Singer*. Football may have replaced religion, more people than just the singer are humping away at sex, mountains may have replaced the swamp, but the moral terrain is still the same. The land is strong and grim. Buzzards prowl the skies, the "sun was a thin white disk in the cold fog rising out of the ground" (*FS*, p. 170), scrub oaks and leafless chinaberry trees and palmettos spot the ridges. For simple pleasure people bet on snakes who swallow rats or dogs who kill other dogs. The hills are alive with the sound of rattlers.

Meanness is a way of life and so is football in Mystic, though some bring their meanness from faraway places like Tifton or Cordele or Gainesville. The alternative to this hard land is the same sad, dull world of *The Gospel Singer*: Coca Cola signs, the television on all day, Jim Beam drunk from half-pint bottles, a twirl-off between graduates of the Dixie National Baton Twirling Institute (headed by "Mr. Baton," Don Sartell, one of the greats undoubtedly listed in *Who's Who in Baton Twirling*, a resource book I hope Crews has not invented).

What is one to do to exist in this land, in these worlds? Most screw or drink or play football for excitement. Some engage in combinations of the three. Filled with beer, Joe Lon, the novel's protagonist, strikes his straddle-legged cheerleader ex-girlfriend in bed "from behind like she'd been a tackling dummy" (*FS*, p. 115). But Joe Lon has not been able to go to college to prolong his years of mindless stardom playing football, a brutal game of "joy" and "celebration" (*FS*, p. 118), and so for most of the time he is left alone on the land selling bootleg whisky to Negroes and dying of despair. He is dying in one sense of his own limitations, but in another way his failure is, as Crews sees it, I suppose, mankind's failure, the failure of all ultimately who will one day have no more fun, no more sexual bliss to cover momentarily the nothingness out there, the time when status goes and identity goes and sooner or later the body goes, and despair settles in like a dense fog throttling what used to be the soul, when the screwing is over.

*A Feast of Snakes* ends with an act of madness and is pervaded by madness. The land itself or what has been made of it is crusted with madness, as snake festival tourists swarm over the surface of hills, hunting out snakes, burning them up from caves, clubbing them, penning them. One of the acts of history that obsesses Crews occurred when Charles Whitman climbed up the library tower at the University of Texas and methodically killed twelve people walking across the University square. We all face, he says in *Blood and Grits*, our own Texas Towers. "To deny

that you have your tower to climb and that you must resist it to succumb to the temptation to do it, to deny that is done at the peril of your heart and mind."<sup>10</sup> The day of the snake hunt Joe Lon climbs his tower and discovers what he has all along wanted to do in this world of despair. After he kills four people with shotgun blasts, the snake hunters attack him as they had the snakes and throw him into the snake pit. "He fell into the boiling snakes, went under and came up. . . . Snakes hung from his face" (*FS*, p. 177). The snakes are part of the land of which Harry Crews always writes. Traditionally they are evil, but in *A Feast of Snakes* they seem no less horrible than the hunters who pursue them. They are a force on the land we should not forget, and in Crews's novels they inhabit a place that we should fear perhaps as gods are feared, or as they once were feared when they inhabited the land.

I have ignored or given minimal attention to much that is important in Crews's fiction — in terms of his themes, his characterization, and his superb use of comedy, for example — to focus upon how he uses place in his novels. I have tried to indicate that the South he has written about so far is usually the South of very small towns in rural Georgia or areas (often urban) in the Sunbelt South that are without significant history in the Old South of popular myth. These places lack the regionality of the locales he uses in and around his Bacon County home terrain but seem quintessentially American in their kitsch-ridden superficiality. Raw nature in his books may be harsh and usually is unlovely and cruel. It is not Faulkner's land of pre-lapsarian beauty and fertility cursed by the South's sins of pride and slavery (though he obviously admires Faulkner as a writer), nor is it completely the hard, red gullies of Erskine Caldwell's despiritualized territory (though Crews also admires Caldwell). Crews's land is ordinarily a tough place in which to make a living, but it is also a wild place of more than physical potency, a place where spirits would dwell (though not benign spirits) if our earth possessed anywhere remnants of some godly force. It is a place of snakes and hawks. What man has created instead of it, the reclamation parks, the strips of beach and highway north of Miami, the car terminals like Jacksonville, have nothing godly residing in them as places. Their cultures are material and comic and shallow and secular. Perhaps people are drawn to them for these reasons, and because the Bacon Counties are not, after all, particularly happy places to be.

I would like now briefly to indicate some of the ways Crews uses blacks in his fiction, how he places them on the Southern terrain he has created in his novels. Major Southern writers — even those who seem relatively liberal for the South, such as Faulkner and William Styron — are often criticized by politically sharp (and liberal) critics, especially black critics, for the way they depict black characters. Faulkner was attacked, for example, for his Aunt Jemima-Ethel Waters representation of the old "mammy" figure in Dilsey who constantly shushed or ignored her own children while attending to the problems of Mister Charlie's disintegrating family. William Styron was treated like St. Sebastian for presuming to show Nat Turner lusting after white women but not black in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

In *A Childhood*, a book that is itself a kind of fiction, as all such reminiscences are, Crews writes about a black family he grew up close to during his earliest years, tenant farmers on his stepfather's land. The boy of the house is called Willalee Bookatee (the name used in *The Gospel Singer* for the black murderer who is lynched). He is about a year older than the (autobiographical) child Crews, and his younger sister is Lottie Mae (the name of the sheriff's murderer in *A Feast of Snakes*). He writes of his relationship to the black family quite naturally and unsentimentally. They are good people without being the Paul Winfield and Cicely Tyson of *Sounder*. Once Crews tricks the young Willalee by making him carry a heavy load of citron through a field as a magic ritual to ward off a particularly fierce bull nearby. The trick is cruel and the kind of joke little boys pull against each other, a trick in the tradition of the old, cruel humor of the Southwest. That young Crews and a white friend would want to scare the black boy is both juvenile and racist, and Crews in narrating the story shows that he is aware of both attitudes. Willalee is described as "roll[ing] his eyes and shuffl[ing] his feet" when told about the fearsome bull. It is impossible that Crews the writer is not aware that his description of Willalee has made him conform to the cruel, white-created Sambo stereotype. It is possible that a frightened young white boy might have responded in the same manner. Crews describes the racist behavior of the five-year-old boy he says he was when he admits that, in his relations with Willalee, the young black was a friend and yet a "toy" (AC, p. 50). When young Crews learns that Willalee is not just another little boy but a "nigger," he (the mature Crews reports) is not bothered at all. He finds out when he tells a story about a respected black man and calls him "Mr. Jones" and his aunt corrects him, saying, "You don't say 'Mr. Jones,' you say 'nigger Jones.'" Crews says the child he was then continued, repeating "nigger Jones" without missing "a stroke in his story" (AC, p. 58).

Crews also tells in *A Childhood* of Willalee's grandmother, who takes care of him when he is experiencing a crippling psychosomatic loss of control over his legs. The woman is predictably enough called "Auntie," and she is, like so many other characters in Crews's world, "weird." She relates to the sick boy a number of stories about conjuring. One of these stories shows that Auntie may have been weird, but she was not as crazy as the white folks thought she was. An ex-slave herself ("It was impossible to think of people like my daddy and mama owning people like Willalee's daddy and mama. It still is," Crews writes [AC, p. 84]), she tells of a snake she had seen as a girl with the head of her master and blue eyes. The snake is very demanding, and she is mesmerized into doing "anything if he jest take them blue eyes off me and let me go" (AC, p. 85). Ultimately she learns that the only way she can be saved from the blue-eyed snake is to leave it in its ditch and not go near it. The story clearly is a subversive account of how to live with white masters (subversive because told by a trusted servant-nurse to a sick white child). Crews merely lets "Auntie" narrate her story, and, as an older man recounting his youth, does not comment on its political allegory. He has already by the time of *A Childhood* retold the story himself, in a fashion, for the weird black woman Lottie Mae in *A Feast of Snakes* also dreams of snakes and one day kills the white sheriff who has been forcing her to have sex with him, by slashing off his penis,

which she perceives as a snake. Auntie in Crews's *A Childhood* is neither so violent nor so militant, but his inclusion of her story suggests that his knowledge of blacks, and his use of them in his stories, is more complicated than appears on the surface of his fiction.

By the time he wrote *A Childhood* Crew had written eight novels, and had developed to a significant degree his ability to dramatize the world of his characters from within their limits. While his own vision and sensibility are far more advanced, more cosmopolitan, more liberal than those of his characters through whose perception and feelings his narratives ordinarily present themselves, his technique keeps him out of the surface of his books. Yet most readers will sense in his fiction an affinity between Crews and his country-roaring-boy and freak-heroes when they are at their destructive funniest, attacking society's shams and despiritualization. The problem in determining Crews's attitude toward his black characters—which is an ideological and not an aesthetic problem—is, where does Crews through his technique demonstrate his divergence from the racial values that dominate his books?<sup>11</sup>

In the plot of his earliest novel he employs a myth central to the white heart of the South. The book opens with black Willalee Bookatee in jail for killing and allegedly raping what the community of Enigma considers to be the purest-hearted white virgin of their land. Crews mocks this white myth by showing that the woman was (by the community's standards anyway) sexually corrupt. She has been aggressively and whorishly screwing the Gospel Singer as regularly as his visits permitted. Furthermore, the story dramatizes the fact that the woman has not been raped by her black murderer. There is further and obvious irony in the woman's situation since her degradation is a direct result of being "saved" by the Gospel Singer and seduced by him. The town's attitude toward Willalee is what might be expected in a liberal, satiric novel, and what might be expected in a town such as Enigma. Willalee has, because of his act, become depersonalized into "that nigger," though he is a lifelong citizen of the place and respected as far as "niggers" are respected. Other Negroes are too frightened of the consequences to visit him, and it is obvious that he is going to be lynched for his alleged crime.

When Willalee is hanged and castrated, the Gospel Singer is lynched next to him. There are, thus, obvious links between them. Both are victimized by the community. Willalee is killed partly for something he did not do (though he did kill the woman), and the Gospel Singer is destroyed by the mob who wishes him to be their savior. Both are wrongly killed; both are punished for their idealism. Willalee has killed MaryBell, the Gospel Singer's woman, because she insists the Singer is a fraud and because Willalee cannot accept the Gospel Singer's impurity. The Singer cannot accept anything but his impurity and the world's, and his inability suggests another kind of idealism.

However, Willalee is not simply a martyr. He also has a local history, and in that history he is presented as a stereotyped black buck. His life before the Singer saves him is the life of "a razor cut, or a tar-scalded eye, or a burning case of clap off a Tifton high-yellow whore" (*GS*, p. 11). Miss MaryBell in bringing him to the Singer has "helped a mean nigger git right, no more cuttin, no more takin the

Lord's name, no more yellin' girls" (*GS*, p. 186). Besides being a victim of bigotry and a man hanged next to a hanged savior he passionately believes in, Willalee is also a very conventionally religious black buck. He is a man like other men, foolish, dangerous, and filled with a yearning for the spirit that has also been squeezed from the dirt farmers of Enigma. He seems the child of generations of Negroes in books, a low-life, razor-wielding murderer. In Crews's world, which encompasses and contains the world of Enigma, he is one of the better men, yet he has also done what the community of Enigma did — he has killed because his desired expectations of purity, of divinity, were thwarted. But how mean are the lynchers of Enigma beside the victims, black and white, they have murdered! Again, Crews depicts his chief black character in *The Gospel Singer* in both conventional and complex ways.

If *Naked in Garden Hills* has a theological theme, that theme has to do with how humankind is to live in a state fallen from grace, no matter whether the fault for the fall lies with man or with a departed, disgusted God. In more secular terms, the theme is how to deal with what seems the futility of reality after the failure of dreams. One of the chief embodiments of failure in the book is Jester, a Negro, "poor . . . half as big and twice as black as anybody" (*NGH*, p. 41). Horses were to have been the agents of his "salvation," the instruments by which he would escape his fate of being poor and black and freakishly short in Ocala, Florida, and Jester is confident, as are the whites who have known him from his childhood, that "he was perfect" physically and that he could not miss greatness as a jockey. On his very first ride, however, Jester's horse, for no reason at all, leaves the imaginary groove he has beforehand always run in and runs straight into the stone side of a house, killing himself and hospitalizing Jester for two months. Jester is assured that the accident is in no way his fault, but that is part of the horrible condition he has learned about. "What could a man do when there was no cause? What defense was possible? . . . if one horse had done it, why not any horse?" (*NGH*, p. 43). Jester has learned that death and dreams of escape are uncontrollable. In *Garden Hills*, where he has fallen to, he derives some pleasure from riding in a Buick and on rigged-up chairs and from watching horse races on television.

Jester's fall is not absolute, however. He still maintains the diminutive perfection of his body, and, as his "high-yellow" girlfriend Lucy recognizes, he still loves himself. "He touched himself with great and obvious love." And he has not completely degenerated from his original condition: "He was like some wild thing in the woods in the natural and inevitable process of cleaning itself" (*NGH*, p. 57). He is even capable — unknowingly and unconsciously — of regenerating Lucy. She says he has "taken her off [her] treadmill," off the sideshow platform upon which she performed her sexual dance and smoked a cigarette with her vagina (*NGH*, p. 53). "Watching him, Lucy felt cleaner" (*NGH*, p. 57).

While Jester does not precisely triumph over the fate he discovered when his horse hit the wall for no reason at all, while he perhaps never sheds completely the fear that has prevented him from attempting to escape as a jockey again, he still survives. More than that, he helps another human being to survive. Far less conventionally and sentimentally depicted as a black man than Willalee in *The Gospel Singer*, he plays an important role in the conclusion of *Naked in Garden Hills*.

Gaudily "booted and spurred," he rides "astride Lucy as she mimicked the motions of a running horse" (NGH, p. 211) in the gaudy discotheque the old factory (which looks like a cathedral) has been turned into by the virginal Dolly, the ex-Phosphate Queen. He has become part of Dolly's tacky dream to save Garden Hills, and, while one wonders whether her new Eden a go-go is worth the effort, it is clear that her creation possesses a terrible vitality.<sup>12</sup>

*The Gypsy's Curse*, Crews's next novel in which a black participates significantly, seems a totally secular book, devoid of any religious overtones. The land is covered by roads and houses, save for the crowded, hot beaches. Here redemption, or even lasting human contact, seems impossible, and violence appears to be the only rational response to life. Even the once tough-shelled Baptists now display signs outside their churches such as "WALK IN AND HAVE YOUR FAITH LIFTED" (GC, p. 54).

*The Gypsy's Curse* is the only one of Crews's novels thus far to be written in the first person. Its heavily anglo-centric point of view may thus be attributed to its putative narrator, Marvin Molar, and not to Crews. Marvin clearly has a very deep regard for Pete, the punchy old "nigger" who acts as a trainer around the gym that is Marvin's home. The chief male characters in the book, Al, the gym's owner, Marvin, Pete, and Leroy, a failed fighter from Bacon County, Georgia, seem to love each other (or at least Marvin loves them) with that unstated but close and warm affection men feel for each other in the jock world (into which women trespass as destroyer). Marvin thinks of old Pete, who is so black he is purple, as a "good nigger," is constantly protective of him, and understands that, though Pete is a bit crazy and usually talks nonsense, he has a deep-down wisdom. He knows, for example, that Marvin has been "pussy-whipped" (GC, p. 100) by the wonderfully lapped but vicious woman that Marvin has fallen for, and Pete also offers sage advice when he tells Marvin "ain't been a man walked God's earth couldn't die for a woman. All of us could. Some of us did. But it be a cheap way to go. You understand?" (GC, p. 142).

In his attitudes toward minorities in general Marvin is typical of the characters in Crews's books: he is strongly ethnocentric. "Myself," he says, "I've never cared for spicks, and it seems like half of Cuba's ended up in Tampa . . . smelling like garbanzo beans" (GC, p. 37). His sometime girlfriend Hester shares his feelings: she worries about catching venereal disease from "those Spanish guys [who] can give you the worse shit in the world. I used to fuck one from Ybor City" (GC, p. 67). Crews is not his characters, however, and one should not accuse him of adhering to ideas that the characters he has created — and whose limitations as human beings he is portraying — express. One can, however, draw back behind the putative narrator's shoulder to observe that in Pete, Crews has created a genuinely interesting, comic, wise, somewhat conventional black character. Furthermore, while obviously Crews emphasizes Pete's blackness, he does not treat his characterization in a special manner to make a philosophic or social statement about Negroes. Crews is not a writer who wishes to deliver humanitarian messages. Pete has an element of the freakish about him — but so have the major white characters.

Much the same point could be made for the black characters in Crews's most recent novel, *A Feast of Snakes*: they share the fate of the white characters. Crews does display in the book, however, what seems an increased awareness of the interior lives of his black characters, so that, while the book's white characters still tend to see them in stereotypical ways, the black characters, or some of them, clearly know that they are not what they seem to the whites.

*A Feast of Snakes* is Crews's maddest book in two senses. He seems most angry about the state of life in it, and therefore his humor is at its most vicious and cuts most deeply. His characters, so representative of society's standardbearers of the American way — the local high school football star, the coach, the sheriff, the head cheerleader and baton twirler — behave at their most depraved. At least three characters actually are or become mad, insane. Their madness seems caused by what they have truly experienced, by the terribleness of the life they have lived, either its violence or its nothingness. Joe Lon's sister Beeder goes mad when she finds her mother has killed herself, after her husband has dragged her back from Atlanta and the shoe salesman she loves. She kills herself, leaving a note: "*Bring me back now you son of a bitch*" (FS, p. 120). Black Lottie Mae begins to drift into madness after being forced to submit to the white sheriff's sexual advances. She has at first strongly denied him, but he frightens her with a snake, after trapping her in his jail. Both Lottie Mae and Beeder are driven mad by quite accurately perceiving the nature of the evil and deadly world around them. A psychologist such as R. D. Laing might conclude that their responses are perfectly logical, granted the untenable predicaments they find themselves in. Finally, Joe Lon discovers that his own life is filled with violence but with nothingness also. At the end of the novel he kills four times and then is beaten by hunters and dropped into a snake pit. The last thing he sees, or thinks he sees, is Beeder and Lottie Mae watching him. They are all victims of the kind of life, Crews seems to be saying in this book anyway, that is the life around us, a snake and evil and death and violence-filled life. An equality of victimization operates in the book.

Generally, the blacks around Mystic, Georgia, are seen and treated as "niggers." Though the book is not written from Joe Lon's first-person point of view, his bigot's sensibility dominates the places and scenes and observations of the novel. Though his knowledge of man's ultimate failure (the body gives out, joys decrease, interests wane, fame disappears; one dies sooner or later but always) is impressive in its completeness, his standards are despicable. He is the consummate sexist — complimenting his constantly brutalized wife as being "as good a woman as a man ever laid dick to" (FS, p. 12) — and racist, totally devoid of any intellectual or aesthetic refinement. That his life is a failure he recognizes, for what is it but "carrying shine for a carload of niggers" (FS, p. 18). He knows "that he was destined to deal nigger whiskey" forever (FS, p. 27). He may help blacks because he needs their aid, but what they are to him is a visible symbol of the void his life has become, listening to "*nigger talk. I spend half my goddam life listening to nigger talk and the other half of it totin whiskey to them. God knows what I did to deserve it.*" "Niggers" are to him God's sign that he has done something wrong, though he does not know "what it was" (FS, p. 57).



The blacks in Crews's *Mystic* behave as blacks in *Mystic* would be forced to. Joe Lon's helper George "yessuhs" his boss, drinks with him or by himself, and does not know, Joe Lon thinks, what he makes in wages because "he had never thought to ask" (*FS*, p. 15). Joe Lon feels free to do what he wants in front of George: "George would not say anything. That was the good thing about a nigger. He never let on that he saw anything or heard anything" (*FS*, p. 12).

Most of the time the Negroes' behavior in *A Feast of Snakes* reflects Joe Lon's view of them, even when they are not being seen through Joe Lon's vision. Totally independent of it, Lottie Mae's Uncle Lummy and Aunt Lily "fought all the time, had both been cut by razors, each by the other, and drank moonshine whiskey, sometimes separately and sometimes together in the bed, where they were not careful with their nakedness" (*FS*, p. 67).

But in several key sequences the Negroes of *Mystic* live beyond Joe Lon's perception of them. Lottie Mae, for example, knows that "white people were dangerous and snakes were dangerous and now the two were working together, each doing what the other told it to" (*FS*, p. 122). It may be that by the time Joe Lon arrives at the climactic snake hunt and kills four whites he has arrived at the same conclusion: even so, Lottie Mae has preceded him in a way he would not, with his limited view of blacks, be able to anticipate. Lummy, George's brother, also demonstrates an awareness of his situation that is rare in Crews's fiction and unique for a black character. "*I am the nigger,*" he thinks after explaining something to an unlistening Joe Lon.

*I am the nigger. That is the white man. There is a tree. There is a road. This is Mystic.*

That's the way it had to be as long as he was around a white man. As soon as he was *not* around a white man, he quit being a nigger and thought about many, many things that he did not ordinarily think about. One of the things he thought about was killing Mr. Joe Lon (*FS*, p. 149).

Tomming it for whitney is undoubtedly a dying practice that is perhaps nonexistent in much of the country. But in places such as *Mystic*, which still exist in land that may seem waste wilderness to voyagers along our interstate highway system or irrelevant to citizens of the (once more) New South of places like Atlanta or Montgomery, the deadly farce probably still is carried out. And Crews is true to *Mystic*, where Negroes still shuffle before the whites who still dominate them, but where blacks, like whites, meet violence either with madness like Lottie Mae and Beeder, or with more violence, like Lottie Man and Joe Lon, and where, like Lummy, they are quite conscious of what they are inside, away from the blindness of white stereotyping. Crews's Negroes in *A Feast of Snakes* seem like Melville's in "*Benito Cereno*." Crews depicts them as being as human as his whites, brothers and sisters under the skin in a brutal, deadly world.

In sum, then, place in Crews's fiction is carefully designed to help dramatize that world from which God seems to have departed, leaving sin and vengeance behind. His Southern fiction typically erases or suggests only faintly in the background the South's beauty; instead, Crews stresses the harshness and ugliness of its terrain, which is usually a bleak and bitter and unproductive land, burned by the sun and

bursting only into muck with the rain. But Crews does not view this natural landscape merely as a barren place of toil. The land contains a powerful force to be feared, a wildness to be respected, an almost godlike cruelty. If God exists, he is probably best represented by the land. If He no longer exists, the remains of His punishing spirit may still reside in the land — and possibly in the hearts of the land — and possibly in the hearts of the people who inhabit the land and who seemingly have nothing else to replace God with. Usually this land is out of the way. The cities are in the way, in a newer, tawdry South without rich traditions, loaded with junk and blank with parking lots and despiritualized lives. No fear or respect is owed these urban places.

Crews's major characters living in either place are unhappy, though frequently viciously funny. Like the characters in Graham Greene's novels (and Greene is one of Crews's favorites), whether they know it or not, they are trying to find substitutes for God. On a less portentously theological level, they are trying to make do, to cope, to love, desperately to blot out the nothingness of life and the everywhere-ness of death. Some, like Dolly in *Naked in Garden Hills*, appear to succeed, but at a tremendous cost of diminished values. Others, such as the protagonists of *Car* or *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, seem to find at least temporary hook-ups with loving, similarly needful women. But in each of these books the finally coupled lovers swirl away down the highway much like the fabled sweethearts in Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes," who fade romantically into a beautiful storm. Others, such as the Gospel Singer or Marvin Molar or Joe Lon, drown in violence, their own or that of others they have induced.

Blacks suffer along with whites in both the country and city locations Crews depicts. Like Willalee in *The Gospel Singer*, they are similar to whites in believing in false saviors — they have not, as they seem to have in Faulkner, cornered the market on true piety. They are often victimized, although occasionally they display, as does Pete in *The Gypsy's Curse*, a fool's greater wisdom. They also try like Jester in *Naked in Garden Hills* to escape the same pits of failure as the whites, and, again like Jester, they can succeed in the sense that at least their dance of doom can take place in a jazzy discotheque. In other words, in many ways Crews treats his black characters the same way he treats his whites. He constantly satirizes characters who are black, but he performs the same operation upon his whites. In earlier novels such as *The Gospel Singer* he employs traditional stereotypes in focusing on razor-toting, high-yellow, loving "niggers," but even then he also demonstrates awareness of their brutal dispossession from society.

In his most recent books, *A Feast of Snakes* and *A Childhood*, he continues to employ these stereotypes, but with increased perception of the reality of blackness underneath the mask of behavior some blacks have been forced to assume. Partly because the values dominating Crews's books are the values that dominate his white characters, his fiction so far doubtless would be awarded no medals for promoting racial understanding or portraying black characters positively. Doubtless, too, Crews does not perceive those goals as consistent with his concept of the writer's job, which is to tell stories that show what we are like by placing us in extreme situations where we are pushed to the brink and beyond.

## 5. Crews's Freaks

David K. Jeffrey

They are creatures from our earliest nightmares, the freaks in Crews's novels. Lumps of flesh without form, dwarfs, midgets, fat men, geeks, and alligator boys with scabrous flesh. They are a very gallery of abnormality, a sideshow, a carnival, a Ten-in-One. They appear in his first novel, *The Gospel Singer* (1968), and in his latest work, *Blood and Grits* (1979). Indeed, in his first three novels and in *The Gypsy's Curse* freaks are important, even central, protagonists. It is a startling preoccupation, Crews's concern for freaks, one that began to engross him in his earliest childhood, one that even now surprises him and seems in some ways inexplicable, even to him, but one that is central to his work.

Freaks, or freaks of nature, mistakes of nature, deviants, human oddities, monstrosities, or monsters—whatever the label, such creatures are traditionally divided into three classes: *monstres par exces*, *monstres par default*, and *monstres doubles*. Giants and fat ladies, for example, and humans with six toes or three breasts, are monsters because of their excess; they have more than normal. Midgets and dwarfs, living skeletons and humans with one hand, one limb, are monsters because they have less than normal. Finally, geeks, Wild Men of Borneo, hermaphrodites, and Siamese twins, creatures who are hybrids of man and beast or man and woman, form the class of double monsters. Whatever his class, the freak, as Leslie Fiedler notes in his book about them, “stirs both supernatural terror and natural sympathy, since . . . he is one of us, the human child of human parents, however altered by forces we do not quite understand into something mythic and mysterious, as no mere cripple ever is.” We react ambivalently to the ambivalence of the freak, for he “challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth.”<sup>1</sup> Confronted with the freak, that is to say, the viewer recognizes that “conventional boundaries” do not obtain, that the distinction between the freak and the viewer, them and us, is an illusion.

Harry Crews confronted these boundaries early in his life and recognized them

as illusory at the time. His childhood, and his autobiography of that childhood, is, as much as anything else, a record of his confrontation with monsters from various categories, monsters that Crews grew to know, heard about, or himself became in Bacon County, Georgia, during the first six years of his life. His mother's first child, for example, died a few minutes after its birth, "its liver on the outside of its body," a "gross deformity" that Bacon County folks believed "was the consequence of some taint in the blood or taint in the moral life of the parents."<sup>2</sup> Crews himself confronted and, in fact, crossed the boundary between the normal and the freakish when he was five years old. At that age he contracted a fever, and his legs began "to draw up. They were bent at the knees," and the ligaments slowly drew his heels toward his buttocks. Doctors told him he would never walk again. As word spread throughout the county, relatives at first, then neighbors and total strangers, "all of them," he writes, came "to stare at me where I lay in a high fever and filled with the most awful cramps, . . . to stare at my rigid legs. I knew that they were staring with unseemly intensity at my legs, that they wanted most of all to touch them, and I hated it and dreaded it and was humiliated by it. I felt how lonely and savage it was to be a freak."<sup>3</sup> To compound this horror, during the months he endured thus crippled, an insane old black woman, supposed to nurse him, convinced him that birds had taken possession of his being and crippled him. There was to be yet more. After he recovered the use of his legs, while still only five, Crews fell into a vat of boiling water up to his neck, was plucked out, and watched his skin fall off into steaming puddles on the ground. He spent several months scabbing and healing, but, until he was fifteen, there were scars on his back, his legs, and his right arm, "puckered and discolored."<sup>4</sup>

Of course most of the people in Bacon County suffered from one deformity or another, as Crews recognized in his childhood. For example, in discussing the *Wish Book*, the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, he writes:

I first became fascinated with the Sears catalogue because all the people in its pages were perfect. Nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple. And if they didn't have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire, or knives, or fishhooks. But the people in the catalogue had no such hurts. They were not only whole, had all their arms and legs and toes and eyes on their unscarred bodies, but they were also beautiful. Their legs were straight and their heads were never bald and on their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much of in the faces of the people around me.<sup>5</sup>

The misfortunes that Crews describes here as happening to others are all the results of accidents, of violence, of human error. These misfortunes leave their victims deformed but not abnormal, and the distinction is important because it points to a difference in kind, not degree. Some human agency bears responsibility for the scars on the other people Crews described. But what bears the responsibility for the birth of a monstrous sibling or the striking of a healthy five-year-old boy

rendered by some unknown malady a crippled midget (a *monstre par default*) who believes himself an avian hybrid (a *monstre double*)? It is precisely the question raised in our minds by the existence of freaks throughout history,

as the oldest word used to name them in our tongue indicates. "Monster" is as old as English itself, and remained the preferred name for Freaks from the time of Chaucer to that of Shakespeare and beyond. The etymology of the word is obscure; but whether it derives from *moneo*, meaning to warn, or *monstro*, meaning to show forth, the implication is the same: human abnormalities are the products not of a whim of nature but the design of Providence.<sup>6</sup>

If design govern in a thing so small, it does not show forth its own inexplicable malignancy; rather, if design govern, it shows forth for Crews "some taint in the blood"; it is some outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual corruption. I will have more to say shortly about this sense that the freak bears responsibility for his own freakishness, but for now I want only to suggest that, as Crews himself indicates, his own early misfortunes led him across the conventional boundaries separating freaks and normals, leading him thereafter to sympathize and to identify more completely with freaks than with normals.

Early in his career Crews denied this, dismissing the notion in an interview with V. Sterling Watson, who had the temerity to ask Crews flat: "Do the freaks in your work reflect your own view of yourself?" Crews responded:

They're not me. I'll tell you about as close as I can get to it. One of the reasons they keep cropping up in my fiction—and this is all after the fact, because people keep after me so I've thought about it. If you have a withered arm or a badly deformed back, or if you're a midget, all the facades that people maintain in their lives to keep people from knowing who they are and what they're like and what they're doing, don't work for you. When a midget walks into a place to get on a stool to get a hamburger, he's got ten problems to solve with people looking at him. . . . It's a truism that psychologically, and every other way, we are busily concealing ourselves. Well, it's just infinitely more difficult to conceal yourself if you are walking around in that kind of body. Diane Arbus, a fantastic photographer . . . , talks about the fact that we all eventually come to our traumas in life, nobody escapes this. A freak is born with his trauma. And looking back on these things, I think maybe that's the compulsion behind all that stuff in my fiction. Still, I don't think about those things when I'm working.<sup>7</sup>

And this response seems to have become rote by now, at least when Crews is being interviewed. Certainly, when Donald Noble and I talked with him several years after the Watson interview, he said again that he used freaks in his fiction because they have no facades, no disguises. "A midget when he turns the corner, he sees a thing in a guy's eyes; he goes into a hamburger shop and he can't get up on the stool . . . ," and so on. He went on, however, to say this:

None of this was very conscious. I told you before, I'm not a very conscious writer. Now, there's a midget in each of the first three novels I wrote. I gave the third manuscript, third novel, to a wonderful lady I was married to, Sally, and she read it (she's a pretty good critic and reader), and she came out and had this look of anxiety and despair and puzzlement on her face. She said to me, "You don't intend to make a career out of midgets, do you?" It was the first time I realized really, I swear to God—that I had three novels, cheek to jowl, with midgets in them. I don't know where that comes from. I don't know exactly . . . it just seems to help me do what I need to do, say what I need to say, deal with whatever preoccupations I have in the world, to have people such as these. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Neither of these responses quite answers the question, but both responses do suggest that Crews uses freaks as vehicles in his novels; vehicles which help him deal with those novels' subjects. Crews comes closer to answering the question in his own fine recent essay "Carny." There he writes of the day he "started loving freaks." He had just gotten out of the Marine Corps, taken a job with a carnival, and was living in a trailer with a husband and wife, the Bearded Lady and a man with a divided face. One day he recognized how much like other people they really were, how human:

. . . not a very startling revelation, I know, but . . . one most of us resist because we have that word *normal* and we can say we are normal because a psychological, sexual, or even spiritual abnormality can—with a little luck—be safely hidden from the rest of the world. But if you are less than three feet tall, you have to deal with that fact every second of every day of your life. And everyone witnesses your effort. You go into a bar and you can't get up onto a stool. You whistle down a taxi and you can't open the door. If you're a lady with a beard, every face you meet is a mirror to give you back the disgust and horror and unreasonableness of your predicament. No matter which corner you turn on which street in which city of the world you can expect to meet that mirror.

And I suppose I have never been able to forgive myself the grotesqueries and aberrations I am able to hide with such impunity in my own life.<sup>9</sup>

Crews's remarks, drawn from three different contexts which extend over a period of several years, make four important and interrelated points. First, they make clear that Crews's choice of freaks as subjects is an unconscious choice, part of an artistic mystery that he has trouble explicating, understanding, or unraveling. Second, they suggest that his attitude toward freaks is to some extent ambivalent, alternating between acceptance, even "love" of them, and dismissal of them as "all that stuff in my fiction." Crews exhibits here something rather different from the reaction Fiedler speaks of, the stirring of pity and terror in the presence of the myth and mystery of freaks, but Crews recognizes the same thing that sparks that reaction; that is to say, Crews apparently experiences no revulsion at the otherness

of freaks but accepts them as humans like himself. Third, while Crews rejects any explicit identification of himself and the freaks in his fiction, he admits to a sense of guilt because he is able, as freaks are not, to hide his own "grotesqueries and aberrations," which he takes to be revealed in them physically. This is an extraordinary statement, revealing, I believe, Crews's sense that his earliest torments were God's fit punishment for his tainted blood, his sins, and a sense that his escape from that punishment was unfair. Crews's statement also suggests, it would seem, that the freaks in his novels incarnate the "grotesqueries and aberrations" of his own life, bring them to light, and make them coherent, at least to himself.<sup>10</sup> Fourth and finally, Crews's remarks suggest that his freaks function structurally in his works, as foils to other characters.

Preferring to leave matters of artistic mystery and of the artist's subconscious to literary psychoanalysts, I want to pursue the last of these points, examining Crews's use of freaks both structurally and thematically in the five of his novels in which they appear. In all five of these works a midget serves as a structural foil to supposed "normals." Thus, Foot, so-called for an appendage twenty-seven inches long and eighteen inches wide, contrasts with the Gospel Singer's lean, tall, blond physical perfection. In *Naked in Garden Hills* Jester, a ninety-pound black midget jockey, acts as a foil to Mayhugh Aaron, five feet tall and six hundred pounds of Fat Man, and both physically flawed men contrast with the tough and virginal perfection of Dolly Furgeson, the former beauty queen. Jefferson Davis Munroe, a muscular midget masseur, first appears in *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* paired variously with Pearl Lee Gates, the gigantic owner of a home for old people; Jeremy Tutley, a decrepit, dying eighty-year-old; Carlita Rojas Munde, a huge, black voodoo priestess; and Sarah Nell Brownstien, six tall feet of postal sorter and would-be writer. Munroe also appears on a poster in *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, still a midget but here also a black belt karateka; he contrasts with Belt, also a black belt, but one who enjoys average height, and with John Kaimon, a mere tyro at karate but another normal. Finally, Marvin Molar, a deaf-mute strong man who binds his withered, ruined legs to his buttocks and walks on his hands, acts as a foil to the body builder Russell Muscle and to Hester Maile, the physically perfect woman he loves and for whom he suffers the gypsy's curse.

How these characters function thematically Crews suggests in noting that "if you're a midget, all the facades that people maintain in their lives . . . don't work for you." Foot and Jester, Jefferson Davis Munroe, and Marvin Molar have no disguises and no place to hide. Lacking facades, they point up the facades that others, normals, do hide behind. Thus, for example, Foot's physical imperfection accentuates the Gospel Singer's beauty, but Foot's honest admission that he has packaged his own abnormality and that of his fellows into a Freak Fair which has made them all rich contrasts with the Gospel Singer's dishonest denial, until the novel's end, that his beauty, his religion, and everything about him, disguises corruption, that he too is a package, a deal. Jester's thinness accentuates Fat Man's bulk; Jester's dream of "horses," Fat Man's of a cross-country runner he loves; and the gradual corruption of Jester's obsession—he first rides a thoroughbred, then a plodding nag, and finally his mistress—accentuates the progressive

swelling of Fat Man himself. Physically flawed, both Jester and Fat Man also lack emotional control; both are creatures of appetite, fixated on horse, on love, on food. The fixations of these freaks, however, contrast and seem preferable to Dolly Furgerson's obsession with power and "organization," with control over other people, whom she either buys or, in the novel's vivid allegorical final scene, crucifies. Jefferson Davis Munroe's healthy but tiny body accentuates the flabby ill-health of the members of the Senior Club where he works, "cleaning the pumps" of the aged normals and promising them "life." Jefferson Davis wants to grow up, and the object of his obsession, he believes, can be attained only through magic, in which he believes quite literally. Absurd his belief may be and vain his desire, but his search for magic, for life, strength, health, and growth, contrasts with the mundane or macabre concerns of the novel's other characters—of the dying seniors for their lost youth, of Junior Bledsoe for the sale of caskets and tombstones, of Reverend Hiram Peters for Everlasting Life and the passage of time, of Pearl Lee Gates for the management of her business (old people), and of Sarah Nell Brownstien for "real life" she can transform into pulp romances. Like Foot's, Marvin Molar's physical imperfections accentuate the physical beauties of others, in this case of Russell Muscle and Hester Maile, but Marvin's charity to Russell's family contrasts with Russell's own selfish disdain of his wife and children, and Marvin's selfless, desperate, and consuming love for Hester contrasts with her faithless testing of him.

As the foregoing contrasts indicate, Crews uses his freaks differently in the five novels. If such characters help him say what he needs to say, deal with whatever preoccupations he has, his different uses of those characters suggest that his preoccupations have changed in the course of his career thus far; his different uses of those characters also suggest how those preoccupations have changed.

In his first novel, for example, Crews seems preoccupied with the Gospel Singer's sin, his corrupt and fallen nature,<sup>11</sup> and with his gifts, his beauty and talent. The two polar opposites themselves speak of man's duality. Thus, the Gospel Singer's voice has "brought him into the presence of God," but it has also brought him into the presence of hundreds of women, whom he seduces and corrupts. As he thinks, recognizing his sin but refusing to accept his own responsibility for it, his "gift" has "proved a curse."<sup>12</sup> His gift is also a curse in that it has "displaced him, made him uncomfortable among his own blood kin, made the place of his birth strange and unreal" (*GS*, p. 71). Although his family begs him to return home to Enigma and "be with his own kind," the Gospel Singer denies them initially, insisting "they were not his own kind, and had not been since he had found the gospel singing voice. . . . Probably they had not been his own kind since he had been marked at birth with the kind of beauty that none of them had ever seen" (*GS*, p. 51). Certainly, the novel's characters all seem to provide abundant evidence of the truth of his statement. His brother Gerd's body seems "one huge unlanced boil" (*GS*, p. 35); his brother Mirst and sister Avel, budding rock singers without talent, seem creatures from another planet; his congregation consists primarily of the lame, the retarded, and the dying; and he is himself followed relentlessly, pursued, by Foot and his Freak Fair, whose posters appear, as if by magic, when



the Gospel Singer's do, and who draw their crowds from his congregations. The Gospel Singer believes the Freak Fair to be "a kind of concentrated Enigma, the very kind of thing he had run half around the world to escape" (*GS*, pp. 55-56). For their own escape, his congregations run either to him, as one of God's chosen, a sign and promise of physical perfection, or to the Freak Fair, as a sign, Didymus exclaims, of "God's WRATH! All the perversions of the flesh are there, every form and kind of wrecked body! They are signposts for humanity! You'll never see as clearly as you will looking into the face of the man that has no eyes, not even holes for eyes, nothing, solid from the nose up (*GS*, p. 56)!" But the Gospel Singer, unlike his congregation, cannot see because he will not look. He refuses to attend the Freak Fair, a symptomatic refusal in line with his conscious isolation from Enigma and his family—from, that is, his origins. Thus isolated and secure in his gifts, he can believe himself morally superior, a belief which brings him no more pleasure than those sexual exploits in which he is driven to indulge; only his confession of them to Didymus and his private penitence bring him, if not happiness, at least peace.

Eventually, however, near the end of the novel, he does go to the fair and is "bemused . . . by the peace and the pleasant orderliness" there (*GS*, p. 200). He meets Foot's valet, Randolph, "a short, fluid creature with a low, square head and arms and legs that seemed reversed" (*GS*, p. 201). Initially horror-struck, the Gospel Singer does at parting shake Randolph's hand, or rather the "club-like thing with buttons of flesh on the end of it . . . smooth and hard as polished wood. But," he discovers, "it was warm too" (*GS*, p. 202), and thus begins a series of discoveries about the humanity of freaks and, consequently, about himself. He discovers that Foot's appendage is not ugly and that he had no reason to be bothered by Foot's following him; he discovers that both he and Foot have what Foot too calls "a gift, a special . . . consideration under God" (*GS*, p. 208); and he discovers from Foot that his sense of his own superiority is not unique, that "every man is convinced that his name appears first on the scroll of Heaven. . . . Every man knows that his gifts will set him free if he is just lucky enough" (*GS*, pp. 208-9). Finally, he discovers that he could be Foot's "friend" (*GS*, p. 210). Thus acknowledging his sense of similarity to Foot, the Gospel Singer next acknowledges his kinship to Gerd, "diseased and unhappy, but his brother still" (*GS*, p. 223). At last willing to acknowledge his part in and his responsibility to the family of fallen man, the Gospel Singer yet balks at public confession of his sins. At the novel's end, however, goaded by Didymus, he does confess publicly, bellowing at his congregation, "I'm the biggest sinner here. . . . Didn't you know from your own black hearts what mine must be like?" (*GS*, pp. 234-35). Betrayed by this admission that there is no human perfection in a lapsarian world, that physical perfection does not necessarily mirror moral perfection, the congregation lynches him in a vivid scene which echoes Christ's crucifixion. Ironically, though, his confession, not his gift, acts to free the Gospel Singer from his false, proud sense of his superiority, and his thought of his sorrow for his friend Willalee as well as his assessment that the lynch mob is damned to Hell may suggest that he is redeemed in the instant of his death (*GS*, p. 238).

In *The Gospel Singer*, then, freaks represent the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual ugliness common to all men since the Fall, and Crews moves his protagonist toward a recognition of that fact. The Gospel Singer shares with Crews the revelation Crews describes in "Carny," quoted above. Like Crews, the Gospel Singer comes to recognize his kinship with freaks, after first hiding his "psychological, sexual, or even spiritual abnormality"<sup>13</sup> from himself and from others behind the facade of his physical perfection and his talent.

While in his first novel Crews focuses primarily on his protagonist's progress through Enigma and through his soul during the course of one day, in his second novel Crews concentrates his attentions on two freaks, Jester, the midget jockey, and the Fat Man, and on a beauty queen, Dolly Furgeson, over the course of several weeks. Like *The Gospel Singer*, *Naked in Garden Hills* culminates in a kind of crucifixion, but in the later novel it is the freaks who are "crucified." Nor is there a character in Crews's second novel who, like the Gospel Singer, becomes aware of his own sins, grotesqueries, aberrations, or abnormalities; rather, the two freaks begin the novel in that awareness and are drawn by their concomitant psychic flaws toward successively more horrifying degradations. Unlike the Gospel Singer, neither Jester nor Fat Man achieves a final illumination, nor does either finally repent; unlike Foot, Dolly is no benign and sympathetic organizer, wishing to achieve peace and order in the carnival-like world she creates.

Crews's second novel traces the transference of power in and control over the world of Garden Hills from Fat Man to Dolly. Theirs is an unequal battle in a fallen world. Garden Hills is no more than a "deep hole" in which lie six rows of six houses, an abandoned phosphate plant, and the hill on which Fat Man's house rests.<sup>14</sup> The former owner, Jack O'Boylan has left the place to Fat Man, who tries throughout the novel to keep it as it formerly was.

He had thought of himself as a man apart, as being outside the condition of those living at the bottom of the hole. After all, he lived on the hill and had a contract. . . . He was a hero here in Garden Hills; outside Garden Hills he was a freak. Here he was held in reverence; he had beaten the system. Elsewhere, children laughed; adults wanted to stone him. (NGH, p. 122)

At the novel's end, however, abandoned by the residents and by Jester, his money exhausted, desperately hungry, Fat Man descends his hill, walks a gauntlet of sneering customers at the phosphate plant (which Dolly has transformed into a discotheque), swallows a liquid which burns "like vinegar" (NGH, p. 210), enters a cage, and ascends in it when twelve men pull its golden rope. Yet this crucifixion in no way suggests Fat Man's salvation; he remains throughout the novel the weak, flaccid, voracious creature his name suggests. Rather, the crucifixion represents the triumph of modern barbarism, the triumph of "*The Immaculate Virgin Dolly. . . . Man yet unborn would speak Her name, sanctify Her iron hymen and die with the song of it on their lips,*" as she thinks (NGH, p. 193). Strong-willed and hard-bodied, Dolly signals the coming of Mammon and "the power of money" (NGH, p. 183). Money enables here to transform Garden Hills from a sterile wasteland into a modern Paradise, Dolly's A Go-Go, with its mindless, frenetic energy and

callous, violent mobs. Money enables her to buy and corrupt Jester, who, booted and spurred, rides his mulatto lover as she mimics the motions of a running horse in another of Dolly's cages. Money, in short, enables her to create a kind of Freak Fair and to cage and humiliate her exhibits.

In *Naked in Garden Hills* Crews's characters, freaks and normals alike, seem driven by their various appetites—for horses, for food, and for power—and all are deeply flawed. Yet, because Crews uses third person point of view with limited omniscience, allowing access to the minds of Jester, Fat Man, and Dolly in different chapters of the novel, the reader does sympathize with Jester and Fat Man, finding in them a kind of dignity as well as very human hopes and fears which contrast with Dolly's inhuman or suprahuman desires. Thus, the reader witnesses the degradation of the freaks with pity, the triumph of Dolly with dismay. The novel is the first, but not the last, in which Crews takes the reader into the minds of freaks; his adoption of their points of view and fine manipulation of the novel's affective structure make the humanity of the freaks evident without polemic.

Crews's third novel thus surprises and disappoints because he manipulates the shifts in point of view so badly, at least in my opinion. *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* seems to me Crews's least successful novel, one which fails to sustain either the promise or the tone of its hilarious first chapter. The novel contains what is by now a nearly requisite midget, here Jefferson Davis Munroe, and a reference to the possibility of crucifixion,<sup>15</sup> one that is not realized, however. Crews populates the novel with a variety of desperate and weird characters, taking us into the minds of a hung-over Negro mechanic, a Haitian voodoo priestess, a salesman of prettified burials, a preacher who denies the reality of death, an owner of a home for old people, a dying resident of that home, and a postal sorter who aspires to be a writer. Through these characters Crews directs satiric jabs at racial stereotypes, attitudes toward death and dying, sex, and fiction writing. Through Jefferson Davis, Crews states the theme which provides some small measure of unity among the novel's disparate elements. Jefferson Davis has

lived with the knowledge of the world's evil planted in him as solid as bone. It was not as though he could forget it. He carried the evidence with him: his body. . . . But he had never found the hand that could release him, let him flower. And now he had found the magic, he could not talk to it. It was a Spanish, which to Jefferson Davis meant some sort of abnormality of the flesh—like being tongue-tied. (TT, p. 40)

Here, as in Crews's earlier novels, man is trapped in a fallen world in a mortal, decaying, and abnormal body (either perfectly beautiful or perfectly grotesque) from both of which he seeks release by the magic of some sort of transformation. Jefferson Davis seeks literal transformation, literal magic. The others seek the magic of eternal life, of love, or of art, but the quest of each appears doomed here. Furthermore, because Crews shifts among so many characters so rapidly, keeping the distance of a third person point of view, the reader (or at least this reader) feels little sympathy for the characters' plights or their failures. Indeed, Crews himself seems unsympathetic to his characters, mocking freak and normal alike.

Crews's fourth novel seems a response to his wife's criticism of his third book ("You don't intend to make a career out of midgets, do you?"). Jefferson Davis Munroe does appear in *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, but only on a poster. Apparently, voodoo magic has not transformed him, for the poster shows him still a midget. And the brief comments about him here render him a pathetically comic figure; master of karate and obsessed with the perfection of its violence, Jefferson Davis cannot, given the nature of his physical limitations, land a blow above his opponent's waist. Still, the freak here also serves to comment on Crews's pre-occupations in the novel, for Jefferson Davis's limitations suggest the limitations of karate itself and of violence as a response to man's plight in a fallen world, as the novel's protagonist, John Kaimon, eventually learns.

In his next two novels, *Car* and *The Hawk Is Dying*, Crews does not mention freaks, but when he returns to them in *The Gypsy's Curse* he returns with a vengeance. He takes as the novel's protagonist Marvin Molar, a deaf-mute and a body builder without functional legs. Amazingly, the novel is "a goddam triumph," as Crews has said.<sup>16</sup> Nor is it a mere tour de force, a technical triumph. Rather, because Crews adopts the first person point of view, and makes the reader believe it, the novel is a triumphant and sympathetic portrait of an intelligent and sensitive man. Like most people, Marvin Molar has had the ill-fortune to fall hopelessly in love; but in his case this cliché has meaning, even poignancy, for the object of his hopeless love, Hester Maile, is also the most awful bitch in Crews's novels and one of the worst in modern literature. Desperate for her "lap" and love, Marvin allows her to disrupt the peaceful family of proud and freakish punch drunks with whom he lives, to cuckold him, and effectually to murder his surrogate father, until he at last retaliates by killing her, leaving him trapped not only in his body and mind but in Raiford Prison.

Hester, Marvin explains early in the book, is "a normal . . . she had everything that was coming to her, all the arms, legs, toes and so on, besides which she could talk and hear and see. But she tended to the bitter."<sup>17</sup> Ironically, most of the normals in *The Gypsy's Curse* are also similarly flawed. Like Hester, Russell Muscle, the normal body builder with whom Marvin does a balancing act, also mistreats his family, and Russell mumbles a bitter refrain throughout the novel, "Goddam world" (*GC*, pp. 106, 112). Aristotle Parsus takes an angry pleasure in telling Marvin the obvious, that he is a freak, and in having sex with Hester. Children delight in throwing things or cursing at Marvin. What Marvin calls "your everyday, normal United States American Christian ladies out doing your good work on your Sunday night" make him "a living excuse . . . to talk about how wonderful it is to be born with a hole in the roof of your mouth, no legs, and on top of that . . . to lose your hearing by accidentally driving your head into the goddam floor" (*GC*, p. 58). Audiences wildly applaud his balancing act, but not "because I was a deaf-mute who could do something besides sell apples on the street-corner. . . . They were cheering for Muscle's legs, and their own, for his ears and tongue and their own" (*GC*, p. 114). Despite the bitterness and savagery of these normals, however, Marvin himself has managed to avoid bitterness, savagery, and self-pity. His strength of will matches the strength of his upper body, and he can even assert a measure

of disdain for and triumph over the spiritually flawed normals by incorporating into his balancing act a one-finger stand, balancing on the tip of his "society finger" (GC, p. 110). Yet none of these virtues—strength, courage, wit—none avails him when he falls victim to the gypsy's curse; once he has found Hester, he is driven by his desperate, painful longing for her to betray his family, his values, and his hard-won dignity. And he does so knowingly. For, as one member of his family warns him, "It be a lot of ways to die in the world, and the worse way of all is for a woman. It ain't been a man walked God's earth couldn't die for a woman. All of us could. Some of us did. But it be a cheap way to go. You understand?" (GC, p. 142).

Clearly, the conflict of the novel centers on the conflict between sexes, and Crews writes powerfully here about the horrors and sufferings of man's crazed need for the woman he loves. For me the power and impact of the novel matches that of Crews's portrait in *A Feast of Snakes* of Joe Lon, the normal illiterate redneck who suffers similarly to Marvin. Neither Joe Lon nor Marvin can fully control his feelings, nor can either man, trapped in his different silence, fully articulate those feelings. Both are muscle men, iron freaks, for whom a life of intellection proves, in Marvin's case, an inadequate and unavailing refuge, or, in Joe Lon's case, a closed book; yet the life of the body and physical violence provide only transient senses of their own power and are no satisfactory, lasting responses to their torments. In their workouts both men seek to transfer the pains of love from their hearts and minds and guts to their muscles. In their workouts, the only question about pain is "how you're going to be able to handle it," as Marvin says (GC, p. 132), and the same might be said of emotional torment. Unfortunately, their ability to endure physical pain does not prepare them for the oppression of emotional suffering.

Indeed, in Crews's novels nothing does seem to prepare man for that. Freak and normal alike, Marvin Molar or Hester, Foot or the Gospel Singer, Fat Man and Jester or Dolly, Jefferson Davis Munroe or the rest, all find themselves caught in bodies, minds, and worlds which finally provide them no pleasure, no happiness, no love, no peace, no order. However, if Crews's freaks and normals are alike fallen creatures in a fallen world, his normals taint and corrupt others, as his freaks do not. The Gospel Singer and the casket salesman, Dolly and Hester, all bear in different ways responsibility for various deaths, the corruption of various ideals. On the other hand, when isolated from the world of normals, Foot, Fat Man, Jester, Jefferson Davis, and Marvin all seem able not only to endure their own conditions but even to create a nearly prelapsarian world.

As the preceing survey of these novels suggests, in Crews's novels freaks function, to a great extent, as normative characters. They are normative characters in three ways. First, as Crews makes clear, his freaks reflect the real condition of man, their bodies a mirror of the grotesque and fallen human state. Second, freaks lack facades and have no place to hide, as Crews indicates; but in his novels this lack does not work to the freak's disadvantage. Quite the contrary. The freak's very grotesqueries free him from ordinary social concerns, the cant and the games which keep man from self-knowledge. Thus freed, freaks are the most elemental

of humans, their problems the most basic. In choosing to portray them, Crews can focus on the simplest and most difficult of human concerns—how to survive; what choices, if any, avail in a hostile world. Third, in the world of the novels the freaks represent and speak for traditional values—for honesty, for charity, for strength, and, especially, for courage. Flawed though they are in any number of ways, unwilling and unable to adjust in a “normal” world, their plans and desires consistently thwarted, still Crews’s freaks have the courage to survive, and, as the epigram to *A Childhood* has it, “Survival is triumph enough.”

## 6. Harry Crews and the Southern Protestant Church

Ruth L. Brittin

In the tradition of Southern writers from the Old Southwestern Humorists to such moderns as Flannery O'Connor, Erskine Caldwell, and Madison Jones, Harry Crews makes powerful use in his fiction, especially *The Gospel Singer*, of the unique, popular Southern religion and its preacher. Yet Crews handles these matters in a distinctive way. While combining the hilarious humor of the Old Southwestern Humorists and Erskine Caldwell with the high-serious, psychological studies in O'Connor and Jones, Crews presents the most authentic picture of all, largely because he is writing from the inside, while they are merely spectators. Crews not only heard the kind of preacher, but went through the kind of religious experiences, that he depicts in his novels.

Crews is quick to say that every one of his books "in some way concerns itself with man's relationship to God," and he is equally quick to state emphatically, "I am a believer,"<sup>1</sup> although he has not found a satisfying denomination with which to affiliate. His upbringing within a Southern Protestant fundamentalist sect has a profound and inescapable effect on him, and that effect is very much in evidence in his novels. To investigate Crews's handling of this Southern fundamentalist belief is the purpose of this study.

The focus of his first novel, *The Gospel Singer*, is on religion; the novel has no fewer than eight preachers, including the Gospel Singer, who is certainly a convert, though most of the time an unwilling one. Crews's next book, *Naked in Garden Hills*, though it includes no preachers, does have a fanatically religious mother whose last words nine months after her one sexual submission to her husband (while fully clothed) are "Brimstone and sulphur. The breath of the devil."<sup>2</sup> Crews's third book, *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven*, features Hiram Peters, an atheist who conducts a dreadfully militant "Christian" church that preys on the unfortunate inmates of a nursing home. Unlike religion in *The Gospel Singer*, this militant religion, though the setting is in the South, is not particularly Southern: the unlocalized satire of the novel is frighteningly all-American. In his next four novels, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, *Car*, *The Hawk Is Dying*, and

*The Gypsy's Curse*, religion plays a very minor role. In *Karate* the face of the fellow looking out of the motorhome window while he is engaged in sexual intercourse looks exactly like Jesus Christ. In *Hawk Preacher* Roe cooperates to capture George when his family thinks he has gone totally insane. When the preacher tricks George with religious palaver, Crews impresses with his harsh representation of religious deception. Supposedly "Christian" women are treated scathingly in one satiric passage of *The Gypsy's Curse*. But not until *A Feast of Snakes* does Crews come back to the Southern religious scene, taking up with great irony the incongruity between Christian talk and the behavior of the talkers — members of the Church of Jesus Christ with Signs Following — and with considerable kindness and sympathy the snake-handling preacher Victor. This study will, therefore, deal primarily with *The Gospel Singer* and secondarily with *A Feast of Snakes*.

Perhaps no other writer has so completely exemplified the Southern Protestant fundamentalist church as Crews. The authenticity of his presentation of Southern religion and its preachers becomes strikingly apparent when one compares it with scholarly studies on the southern church, in particular the work of Samuel S. Hill, Jr.<sup>3</sup> Among the distinguishing characteristics of the southern church, according to Hill, are fundamentalism and revivalism; the evangelical approach; voluntarism (the significance and necessity for a conversion experience at a particular time, which can be dated); personal testimonies to this conversion; the doctrine of assurance (by which one is assured of salvation so long as he is converted and has faith before his death); the lack of a social ethic (whereby the spiritual life is totally separate from any responsibility for social problems in the country); emphasis on "purity of private morality"; "cultivation of piety"; the insignificance of education (particularly theological education for ministers); a belief in "signs"; and the necessity for that descendant of the old camp meeting, the frequently held revival. All these characteristics of contemporary southern religion appear in *The Gospel Singer*. The novel serves as supporting evidence for Hill's account of the southern church, and Hill's book serves to authenticate the novel. Examination of *The Gospel Singer* reveals a clear and complete presentation of classic southern religion.

Hill describes the southern church as fundamentalist "in the popular sense of the term" because "it views truth and life uncritically." Its doctrines are simple, "since only the truthfulness of the source of authority, the Bible, and the propositions which point to cosmic transaction by which man's sinfulness is overcome and his salvation is accomplished matter ultimately" (p. 26). This description, of course, cannot be divorced from the revivalistic and evangelical character of the church. Southern religion tends to be "experiential," neglecting, as Hill notes, other dimensions of religiosity: "the ideological, the ritualistic, the intellectual, and the consequential (ethical)" (p. 28). And, rather than being like the religion of mainstream America with "a degenerate corporate ideal," southern religion is concerned with the individual (p. 49).

Even a quick survey shows that the religion in *The Gospel Singer* precisely fits Hill's description: the preachers are uneducated shouters, exhorters whose main



purpose is conversion — the greater the number of converts, the better — and whose method is excitement of the emotions. The sermons, as a matter of fact, count for little, since the Gospel Singer is the main force at whatever gathering Crews describes; audiences only endure the Reverend Woody Pea or any other preacher, when the Gospel Singer is around. What has been a major part of southern religion from the camp meeting to the protracted meeting and the revival of today, the use of gospel music for the sake of exciting the worshipers to highly emotional states, is the key to the Gospel Singer's problem — being a savior of men when he has no desire to convert. The "coming through" or actual conversion experience caused by the Gospel Singer's performances is described in both individual incidents (MaryBell) and group conversions (whole rows of the audience coming forward to be saved). In the minds of his followers the Gospel Singer becomes more and more a healer, which he knows he is not, much as he would like to help all the freaks (physical and mental) who, he feels, are sucking his life away. Finally, Crews uses all the extravagant details of the mass hysteria evoked in the old camp meeting or contemporary revival. The religion of *The Gospel Singer* displays no sophistication, no intellect or understanding or hunger; there are only fervor, shouting, salvation, and belief in "the laying on of hands."

The handmaiden of fundamentalism, revivalism, is equally evident in *The Gospel Singer*. In defining revivalism Hill states that "it conceives of Christian faith in definitively inward terms. Faith is a reality to be experienced at the deepest level of one's inner life. . . . Revivalism places decisive stress on the memorable, usually emotional, moment of entrance into the Christian life . . . the inauguration of the Christian life" (p. 25). Like fundamentalism, too, revivalism puts little emphasis on theology, worship, and ethics; preaching is "inclined toward the hortatory and persuasive, rarely toward the declarative and instructional," according to Hill (p. 25).

This emphasis on revivalism in the southern church shows itself most distinctly in the old camp meetings that flourished on *all* the frontiers in America but that still flourish singularly in the South because the South has retained its rural nature along with the frontier tradition and its accompanying cultural insulation (Hill, p. 51). Because many accounts of the early camp meetings were recorded by astounded outsiders and foreigners,<sup>4</sup> some of the best and most authentic accounts appear in Old Southwestern Humor. Johnson Jones Hooper's "The Captain Attends a Camp-Meeting" and George Washington Harris's "Parson John Bullen's Lizards" are hilarious accounts of Simon Suggs's and Sut Lovingood's tricks on preachers at camp meetings. As exaggerated as these tales seem, similar tricks were played on preachers at real camp meetings. Charles A. Johnson records several of these tricks, which are generally rough and ribald in proportion to the amount of whiskey being consumed at the time.<sup>5</sup> The old southwest, of course, included Crews's home state, the setting of both *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes*, Georgia, and Crews uses every element of the camp meeting and/or revival.

Though the Gospel Singer repeatedly insists that he sings for money, he is more and more in demand at churches or revivals or wherever preachers are preaching: the preachers recognize a profitable drawing card. He has sung on radio, on

television, in all kinds of halls and auditoriums all over the country, but his reputation for conversions and even more for healing has placed him in a new category entirely, a category that he denies but cannot escape. So Crews places his climactic scene in the largest tent in Georgia, a tent that will hold "three thousand immortal souls," according to its owner, the Reverend Woody Pea.<sup>6</sup> The banners greet the Gospel Singer and his manager Didymus as they enter the Gospel Singer's home town of Enigma, Georgia, and the two rapidly become overrun with people seeking the Gospel Singer, primarily freaks who want to be healed or relatives who bring their afflicted for his healing touch. The revival scene concludes the novel, and the Gospel Singer's dreadful brother and sister, who have been banking on their horrendous renditions of rock music and dance to get them on "Tee Vee," drive off with their new manager - a newspaperman turned opportunist - for a career in gospel singing, an easy, rapid, and clever shift of allegiance, but as sincere as the commitment of most of the preachers who appear in the novel.

Other revival scenes also appear, but in flashbacks rather than in the direct line of the narrative: minor references to appearances in churches, conversion experiences of whole rows of the audience after one song by the Gospel Singer, and steadily growing rumors of healings.

The evangelical nature of the southern religion encompasses most of its other characteristics either directly or peripherally. Hill describes the evangelist, the necessary component of the evangelical type of church or camp meeting or revival, as "the representative man of religion in the southern culture" (p. 81). Crews's preacher-evangelists measure success in terms of the number of sinners they can bring to Christ. Voluntarism, "getting right with God," making the decision for a life in faith, is the central component of evangelical religion. As Hill says, "Voluntaristic in the extreme, this variety of Christianity concentrated on exhorting individuals to act upon an irreducible brace of doctrines, man's sin and Christ's proffer of forgiveness, or else pay the eternal consequences" (p. 14). This decision making brought on by the emotional state attained in the meeting results in the act of conversion at a particular time, a time that can actually be dated. The Gospel Singer's first conversion is a classic example of this. At twenty years of age the Gospel Singer comes home to Enigma to sing in the Big Harrikin Swamp First Primitive Church. He sings one song, "The World Is Not My Home," and Mary Bell rises "from the congregation saved and born again before the preacher has given the first line of the sermon" (*GS*, p. 96). Later in the evening she bores him beyond endurance recounting the experience; to shut her up, he seduces her, her religious experience having prepared her for the event.

Originally in innocence, the Gospel Singer brings about more and more of these conversions, which he later uncontrollably encourages out of sympathy or the fervor of the moment. He helps the people "come through," come to the front of the church or tent, and testify.

One of the most precise applications of Hill's definition found in *The Gospel Singer* is to the doctrine of assurance, which Crews's protagonist defines perfectly. The Gospel Singer, suffering guilt (and Mary Bell's attacks) but not desiring to relinquish any of the pleasures of the flesh, is comforted by the thought that "if it

was anything the gospel songs made clear, it was the fact that every man, no matter how evil he had been, had a chance in the final moment of his life to gain Heaven. He just had to be lucky enough to have the time and the inclination to make the necessary gestures. . . ." (GS, p. 155).

In his novel Crews plays down the "cultivation of piety"; at least, he does not indicate that his characters make much effort in that direction. Poor MaryBell, instead of remaining moral after her spectacular conversion, becomes totally depraved. When she realizes that the Gospel Singer will never marry her, she gains a satanic control over him and works constantly toward his destruction, which does come about as a result of her activities. The evil which motivates their relationship constitutes one of the strongest ironies in this very ironic religious novel.

Hill further notes the lack of social ethic within the evangelical church, pointing in particular to the unconcern of the church about racial matters, specifically during the 1960s. There is no connection between the evangelical church and the brotherhood of man. Unallayed racial discrimination is evident in the Enigma townspeople's treatment of Willalee Bookatee, the Negro who is to be lynched for a crime he has not committed by men who demand the traditional penalty because they themselves lust after MaryBell, the supposed victim.

Obviously, the exhorting preachers in *The Gospel Singer* are far from educated, and the novel thus meets another of Hill's criteria.<sup>7</sup> The Reverend Woody Pea, for example, had been "a turpentine worker outside Milledgeville, Georgia, before he got the call to preach" (GS, p. 224). And there is abundant evidence of a belief in signs in the novel, the strongest being the torrential rains that descend on drought-stricken Georgia just as the Gospel Singer arrives. Of this coincidence much is made by family, television announcers, and freaks — to the Gospel Singer's severe discomfort.

Finally, the abundance of revivals in *The Gospel Singer* is central to the narrative. In numerous flashbacks the Gospel Singer remembers many revivals, and, as I have noted, the climactic episode of the novel occurs in the biggest tent in Georgia, with thousands of persons from miles around coming for the spectacle.

The point here is that Crews's fictional account of the southern church does not deviate from Hill's factual account. Yet Crews is speaking from experience within the church rather than from scholarly investigation. It may be that both the satire and the psychological anguish of the Gospel Singer reflect Crews's own scars and recalcitrant attitude toward the church. Certainly, in his autobiography, *A Childhood*, he reports that his "coming to God" and his first sexual experience occurred on the same evening, the one in the church under the influence of a visiting hellfire-and-damnation evangelist and the other almost immediately afterwards on "the dark back porch of the church."<sup>8</sup> The startling juxtaposition described in the autobiography reflects as well one of the Gospel Singer's problems with religion.

For a more detailed analysis of the religion in *The Gospel Singer*, a brief synopsis of the plot of the novel is in order. The setting is Enigma, Georgia, the home of the Gospel Singer. Willalee Bookatee Hull, a Negro preacher, waits in jail

to be lynched for the supposed rape and confessed murder of MaryBell, the Gospel Singer's girlfriend for whom every man in town lusts, thinking her virginal and pure. The Gospel Singer's physically repulsive brother Gerd, one of the lusters, goes to view her body, laid out in the Enigma Funeral Parlor; grotesquely stimulated by seeing her dead body in a prone position, he wrecks his truck while he imagines seducing her. Gerd is only the first in the novel's parade of freaks; early in the novel the reader hears of the midget Foot, who has a foot twenty-seven inches long, operates a Freak Fair, and follows the Gospel Singer's route to profit from the crowds he draw. The Gospel Singer and his manager Didymus are also due to arrive for a revival scheduled by the Reverend Woody Pea in the biggest tent in Georgia. Through a series of flashbacks, largely through the eyes of the Gospel Singer, we learn that, when he was twenty, he accidentally converted MaryBell and then seduced her; that he progressively taught her more and more whorish techniques which he learned through his constant sexual exploits early with whores and later mainly with newly converted girls and women; that eventually, when she realized that he would not marry her, MaryBell's love turned to hate and she became totally evil; that the Gospel Singer can neither love her nor resist the fascination he feels for her; that Didymus is really a madman who has killed the Gospel Singer's former manager to get control of the Gospel Singer; and that Didymus is essential to the Gospel Singer's peace of mind because he exacts penances from him.

The action that takes place in the immediate narrative involves little more than the building up of the tension of the mighty crowd — finally turned mob — and the tension of the Gospel Singer, who cannot tolerate the pressures of the host of grotesques who come to him to be healed. Trying to escape the crowds who hound him, he visits Willalee Bookatee in his cell. Much to his dismay, he discovers that Willalee has been persuaded to build a church in his name. And Willalee at last is able to remember why he killed MaryBell. She came to him in the middle of the night: "*She say, you saved on a lie, the church a lie, the Gospel Singer a lie. She say, God is a man with his pants down, God is a unbuttoned fly*" (GS, p. 187). At this he had stabbed her repeatedly with an ice pick. On the scheduled hour the revival begins; Didymus forces the final penance upon the Gospel Singer, making him confess before the angry mob, theoretically to save Willalee Bookatee. The mob lynches (crucifies) both Willalee Bookatee and the Gospel Singer. Enigma settles back into its hideous, complacent self: a lynching almost always eases tensions.

The relationship to southern religion of several of the novel's general topics — (1) grotesquerie, (2) sex, (3) signs, (4) superstition, (5) healing, and (6) penances — requires additional discussion, for they are evidence of Crews's entrapment by the southern fundamentalist church principles.

(1) Crews's freaks are a part of the grotesquerie in *The Gospel Singer*; there Crews shows all of religion to be grotesque, exposes the fraud that both the professionals (evangelists) and their advocates indulge in. The preachers are basically in a profitable business; the members of the congregation are lechers and lynchers, and the converted women of the congregation are easy pickings for the Gospel Singer after the meeting. Gerd serves as the representative leacher when he goes



bushes afterwards. Johnson quotes a passage from Lyle describing two of his female parishioners who got pregnant at camp meetings.<sup>9</sup> T. Scott Miyakawa presents a more lurid picture:

. . . Herndon found people at revivals "hugging each other and singing in ecstasy that was half religious, half sexual. . . ." In their hysteria some women would throw themselves on the ground, tear open their clothes, and hug and kiss everyone around them. . . . With some basis, but probably with unfair exaggeration, some cynics have said that "more souls were begotten than saved" at these meetings.<sup>10</sup>

In relationship to *The Gospel Singer*, it is interesting that, according to Johnson, the singing of hymns produced sexual agitation more often than did the preaching.<sup>11</sup> So much promiscuity occurred that guards or watches had to be established to keep the congregation under control — "to prevent affected couples from going into the woods," Miyakawa says.<sup>12</sup> Their success was dubious, partly because of the great quantities of liquor available.<sup>13</sup> Johnson quotes John Humphrey Noyes, "the nineteenth century eccentric philosopher," on the problem:

In the conversative theory of Revival, this power [of God] is restricted to the conversion of souls, but in actual experience it goes, or tends to go, into all the affairs of life. . . . Religious love is the very near neighbor to sexual love and they always get mixed up in the intimacies and social excitements of Revivals. The next thing a man wants, after he has found salvation of his soul, is to find his Eve and his Paradise. . . .<sup>14</sup>

A more modern appraiser might add that the next thing a woman wants is to find her Adam and her Paradise. This is certainly the case in *A Childhood*, as we have seen, and in *The Gospel Singer*: at the end of the performance the women flock to the front of the church or tent to surround the Gospel Singer, and he, knowing that he can take his pick, does so, selecting the one he will seduce shortly thereafter (p. 68). In both the novel and the autobiography Crews's accounts of sex and religion adhere to tradition.

Of course, the Gospel Singer's lust is not so simply explained. Rather than seeking for the ultimate or climactic religious experience in sex, he seeks escape from religion in sex. For example, midway in the novel Crews describes the Gospel Singer's panic at being followed everywhere by Foot and the Freak Fair; the Gospel Singer lies awake and sweats, thinking that the freaks are his punishment from God. Then he jumps from his bed, sings a quick penance, and calls in the evangelical choir leader, whom he had deflowered earlier, to help him forget through sex. His sexual exploits (almost always the reward "while he still burned after a service") (*GS*, p. 212) were a release, an escape, and a literal revolt (at least with MaryBell) against religion and God. More mundanely, a girl in Roanoke, Virginia, "had, as he knew she would, made him forget that he was on his way back to Enigma" (*GS*, p. 212). Though his lust usually blanks out God, this time it does not; he fails

to escape from the pressures to be what he cannot believe that he is — a preacher and a healer; and he also fails to escape, in his revolt from religion, the pressures that God Himself puts on him. Later, when visiting Foot and seducing *his* mistress, the Gospel Singer realizes that he may have some difficulty with the seduction because she has not heard him sing; so he opens “his mouth and let out against her ear his voice singing softly of God’s love, of the Bridegroom of Heaven and the bride of the world consummated in spirit when the flesh is gone” (*GS*, p. 214). In the final scene of the book the Gospel Singer insults the crowd by telling them that MaryBell was a whore who had tried unsuccessfully to seduce Willalee Bookatee and that, as for healing, “I caint do nothing but sing gospel songs and lay your women, your wives and mothers and daughters — *all your MaryBells!*” (*GS*, p. 236). As a result, the crowd provides for the Gospel Singer a more lasting escape than sex.

(3) Familiar to all Southerners, especially rural Southerners, is the effect of signs and superstitions in general on fundamentalist Christians. As Johnson notes, “The superstitious pioneers believed such strange occurrences [fierce storms, earthquakes] were not the result of natural forces, but the machinations of either a wrathful God or the devil.”<sup>15</sup> Crews himself had close kin who spoke in tongues, knew faith healers and persons who appeared mysteriously to conjure out burns, and the like (*AC*, pp. 21, 115-16). And in *The Gospel Singer* Crews also makes use of signs: Didymus sees freaks as “signposts for humanity” (*GS*, p. 56); but the more specific fundamentalist type of sign appears to Didymus when a young man. He had left the monastery and is sleeping in the Holy Light Christian Mission in Redwood City, California. His mother appears to him, as is her custom, in a dream. Disquieted, he rushes out into the snowy cold morning: “He knew his mother had sent him for a sign” (*GS*, p. 78). On the front page of a newspaper he discovers that “sign,” a picture of the Gospel Singer and a story telling of a mass conversion. His mission in life is decided: he will find the Gospel Singer and be his manager. “It was a sign” (*GS*, p. 79).

Toward the end of the book Didymus and the Gospel Singer start to go to the First Church of the Gospel Singer. About his companion’s wanting to go there, Didymus says, “That’s a good sign.” The Gospel Singer replies, “Shut up about your goddam signs” (*GS*, p. 193). When they arrive at the church and see its name, which they have not known previously, Didymus says, “It’s a Sign” (*GS*, p. 194). Note the capital *S*. Didymus apparently takes the church as a “Sign” that he force the Gospel Singer to confess at the meeting, ostensibly as the ultimate penance to save Willalee Bookatee but in reality to make a martyr of the Gospel Singer. For all this protesting against such signs, even the Gospel Singer — as he and Didymus are driving away from Foot’s encampment, where he has seduced Foot’s girl — is frightened and keeps looking overhead at the ceiling of his Cadillac, “but instead of a sign of God’s displeasure all he saw was the ceiling of the trailer covered in cubes of acoustical tile in the shape of a black foot with tiny white toes” (*GS*, p. 218). He desperately needs a penance to calm himself, but Didymus refuses him the relief, being resolved to hold out for the final penance at the meeting.

The novel’s most important sign, a sign that affects practically the whole state

of Georgia, is the rain that breaks the two-month Georgia drought as the Gospel Singer arrives in Enigma. In the family kitchen the Gospel Singer's father announces that "it's raining harder" and appears troubled. There is a silent conflict between the father, who knows that the Gospel Singer has brought the rain, and the Gospel Singer, who knows for sure that he has not. Neither can articulate his feelings. Nobody in Enigma states that the Gospel Singer has brought the rain; but all believe it (*GS*, p. 103). Later, Didymus recounts a conversation he has had earlier with one of the "Unfortunates," a freak, who explained the appearance of the crowd:

"Said the rain brought them. Can you imagine that, the rain *bringing* them. There's been a drought all over south Georgia, and seems like the minute we got in the state, it started raining. We were never in it because it would start just behind us, but it was always back there. The Unfortunate in the lane said one of the commercials that I paid for would come on the TeeVee saying the Gospel Singer was coming home to Enigma and CRACK! it would start to rain. Sometimes it would start to rain right while the man on the TeeVee was saying that there was no rain in sight." (*GS*, p. 132)

This is just what the Gospel Singer has dreaded and knew would happen. In bed the night before he had heard thunder and hoped it would not rain because

he knew what the rain would do to Enigma. They would say that he brought it. They would point to him and whisper. They would joke and laugh about it, but in their hearts they would be quietly and firmly convinced that he had made it rain. It would be just one more cross for him to stagger under until he could leave, escape from Enigma. (*GS*, p. 84)

There is no escape for the Gospel Singer from the pressures of God and Didymus and the Unfortunates and the family and the women.

(4) Other superstitions play as big a role as signs in the southern religion of the novel. From the beginning of the story the Gospel Singer's religion is described flatly as superstition (*GS*, p. 56). Guilt-ridden about his repeated sexual relations with MaryBell and concerned over his growing reputation as a healer, he is yet honest with himself and anyone else who will or can listen to him explain his reason for his work — to make money. Crews writes, "And even to the Gospel Singer, whose faith was not faith at all but an overwhelming superstition, it seemed obvious that a man could not have both silk drawers *and* God" (*GS*, p. 146).

When MaryBell realizes that the Gospel Singer is not going to marry her and questions him about their situation, he chides her for bringing God into the discussion. She says that God has been involved from the beginning. He accuses her of blasphemy. She continues, quotes her mother, and adds, "Ma thinks it's a hell of a thing to blaspheme against that old bastard, if you do He'll hound you right into the deepest part of hell and there He'll break your back and watch you burn." The Gospel Singer is terrified of what will come of this.



His hand went before his face in a gesture that was entirely reflex, expecting as he did for lightning to strike and melt the car around them there in the front yard. Beacuse to the Gospel Singer's mind, God was a kind of enormous Black Cat that was continually threatening to cross the path just ahead. And if He did, the Gospel Singer knew the thing to do was to rush around and make the proper number of X's and spit over his shoulder the proper number of times and then sit back and hope that it would be all right. But under no circumstances must a man ever openly invite the Black Cat to cross in front of him, because then the X's and the spitting might not work. (GS, p. 151)

Gerd's religion is equally superstitious. When he encounters the freakish Thing on the road, he believes he has encountered the Devil: "... Gerd was assailed again by the conviction that he was looking into the brimstone eyes of the Devil. He smelled sulphur" (GS, p. 39). The hell-and-damnation, fire-and-brimstone sermons have left their mark on him. In this regard Charles A. Johnson notes:

The belief was common that extraordinary events in nature were the work of Satan. In their preoccupation with a personalized devil, ministers of the popular churches did not dissipate the belief; on the contrary, many encouraged it. Often the burden of their simple discourses was the message that God constantly intervened in the affairs of man to struggle with the Prince of Darkness.<sup>16</sup>

(5) The importance of the laying-on of hands, the healing role of the evangelist, has a long tradition in the southern church, and Crews pays heed to the healer's role extensively in *The Gospel Singer*. The healer's role serves numerous purposes in the novel: it accounts for the tremendous numbers of freaks (grotesques); it allows Crews to deal with the demands of the afflicted, which are a special trial to the Gospel Singer; and, of greatest importance, it becomes a major issue in the Gospel Singer's conflict with God, for at times he almost believes, even against his reason and will, that he has healing powers.

Certainly the people — the families and the afflicted — believe in healing and in the Gospel Singer as God's agent. The morning after the arrival of the Gospel Singer, his home is inundated by people demanding to be healed. An old man brings to the Gospel Singer to be cured his grandson, an idiot who has no control over his body and who cannot talk. The old man says, "I seen a man on the television - Freddy's ma is got a television cause her new husband works in the Sears in Albany - and I seen this man on the television that could make a blind man see or a cripple man walk. Just grab you by the head and send the power of God right through you." The Gospel Singer tries to get rid of him by giving him a large check for a new wheelchair, but money is not what the old man has been waiting over a week in Enigma for (GS, pp. 107-09). Hiram, the undertaker, has brought his blind daughter to be healed. (Incidentally, this child is the only one who recognizes the Gospel Singer as unexceptional — she sees the truth (GS, pp. 164-65). And she is

the one child in Crews's novels who is not a disagreeable little rotter). Of the lot, the most grotesque and the most persistent is a white man who has turned black and obviously is dying. Very aggressive from his appearance at the house to the end of the novel, this man shouts:

"You! You Gospel Singer! . . . I come sixty mile in the driven rain — left my tobaccer crop in the field to burn up if it wants or to drown if it wants — I come sixty mile in the drivin rain because I heard tell you was a man weren't afeared a the layin on of hands and callin on the power of God. I hearded you a healer. They tellin it in the country that you a healer. You gone lay on hands tonight and call on the power of the Lord?" (*GS*, p. 114)

Horried, the Gospel Singer backs off. "The Gospel Singer had never put his hands on another man in his life with the intention of healing him. He'd never once said he could do it. But he knew that people had been saying that about him, saying that he could and did heal the sick, and make the lame walk" (*GS*, p. 115). He signals to Didymus, and they escape in the Cadillac.

On his first night home his mother questions the Gospel Singer about the reports of healing and asks him if he can heal. He answers with an honest no. She quotes specific cases that were reported from a meeting in Cincinnati. He is puzzled by the occurrences, for he too saw them happen. After she leaves his room, he worries over his reputation: he knows that he saves souls and that people believe he can heal (*GS*, pp. 92-93). But all he wants is to sing gospel for a living and to escape from Enigma. As he claims later, he sings for money, not for God, and certainly not to convert or heal (*GS*, p. 145).

Finally, during the climactic scene in the tent, the old grandfather weeps as his knowledge of their hopelessness grows certain — "He ain't gone heal you, son. He ain't gone heal you." And the Gospel Singer protests, "Heal? Heal? . . . I caint heal and I caint save. I never said it. You said that, damn you" (*GS*, p. 236). Then the cripples, the dying black man, the grandfather, and all the rest converge on the Gospel Singer, still pleading, still demanding the healing which is not to come. The dying black man becomes the symbol of all those who have demanded what he cannot give, and the Gospel Singer's compassion turns to hate. At last, in fear and desperation at the mob's on-slaught, he claims that he can heal, but it is too late (*GS*, p. 237).

(6) The business of the penances imposed on the Gospel Singer by Didymus is one of the most interesting and most puzzling aspects of the novel. Crews uses it to account for the fundamentalist's need for absolution; believing himself a naturally depraved creature, the fundamentalist needs something to assuage his guilt. Ironically, the penance of singing gospel songs over and over is very like the "Hail Marys" and "Our Fathers" of the Roman Catholic Church, in which Didymus was raised. For the Roman Catholic penance is a sacrament, so that, after he has made his confession and done his penance, he is forgiven his sin. The Protestant fundamentalist has no such clear or sure absolution, yet he is constantly seeking the purification — the cleansing — that it represents, as the metaphors which

occur throughout the Protestant hymnology indicate. Probably the nearest equivalent for this sacrament in the fundamentalist church is the self-exposure brought about through public confession of sins, which, of course, is the ultimate penance that Didymus demands of the Gospel Singer.<sup>17</sup>

Didymus, who found the life in a monastery too easy (even during his childhood in an orphanage he stuck needles into himself in order to suffer), knows the meaning of and necessity for penance. Believing that "Suffering is God's greatest gift to man" (*GS*, p. 75) and following the directions of his deceased mother, who sits on "the right hand of God" (*GS*, p. 76), Didymus dedicates his life to providing the penances necessary to the Gospel Singer's well-being, penances which the Gospel Singer recognizes as his only comfort on this earth (other than sex, which he has to do penance for). Didymus feels that the ultimate religious ecstasy is martyrdom, and he loves the lives of the martyrs. His mother has explained it all to him in his dreams:

Go into strange lands where the people have never heard of you and tell them things they do not want to hear and cannot understand. If you are lucky they will kill you and eat you. Oh! great good fortune to be stripped of flesh, cooked in a pot, and flushed down some pagan's throat! Lucky man that flops about being hit over the head with clubs, bashed with bricks, and set upon by vicious dogs. That is the way to God, righteousness and the moral life. (*GS*, pp. 82-83)

Believing that Didymus will naturally demand martyrdom of the Gospel Singer as his final penance, the idea comes to him in the Negro church, and he works steadily toward its accomplishment until the end of the book. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Didymus is a madman who perceives the Gospel Singer's true identity as Jesus Christ.

The first experience of penance Didymus prescribes for the Gospel Singer begins the Singer's enslavement, or addiction, to its comforts. Didymus has murdered Mr. Keene, the Gospel Singer's former manager, in order to take control of the Gospel Singer and his career. When the Gospel Singer returns from a revival and the subsequent sexual orgy, he finds Didymus waiting for him with graphic details of his sexual sins. Overwhelmed by Didymus's intimate knowledge, the Gospel Singer succumbs to his demands. Didymus tells him, "What I do expect and demand of you is penance. You must contemplate the inadequacy of your heart. Dwell upon it. Do you understand?" (*GS*, pp. 166-67). Didymus throws him into the closet and cries, "Sing, damn you. . . . Sing, Barbarian! Sing forty *The World Is Not My Home* and while you sing, listen to the voice God gave you and contemplate how you have used it to satisfy the base demands of your flesh!" (*GS*, p. 130). After an hour and fifty-seven minutes the Gospel Singer emerges from the closet, sweaty and exhausted. He and Didymus embrace, and thus their weird pact is sealed.

To the Gospel Singer penance becomes a way of life. "Being shut up with the sound of his voice was like being chastised with a switch. If all went well, he was

purged, relieved of the responsibility of his actions. . . . Didymus knew how to let a man sleep" (GS, p. 87). Near the end of the novel, however, after he had seduced Foot's girl friend, the Gospel Singer suffers remorse and begs for a penance, but Didymus refuses him, preparing for the ultimate demand. Being refused, the Gospel Singer tries to use his brother Gerd as a penance, "a good penance, and, God knows, he felt he needed every penance he could get" (GS, p. 224).

As the foregoing makes clear, Crews makes use in *The Gospel Singer* of many of the basic principles of Southern fundamentalist religion, principles which he treats satirically. Indeed, Crews treats not only the principles, but also their spokesmen, preachers, satirically—with one important exception. The novel is filled with such spokesmen; as a matter of fact, every male figure of consequence except Foot is a preacher of sorts.

Of the eight preachers mentioned, four significant ones need to be considered: the Reverend Woody Pea, Didymus as preacher, Willalee Bookatee Hull, and the Gospel Singer as preacher. The Reverend Woody Pea is the classic Southern fundamentalist revival preacher. A former turpentine worker and all but illiterate, Woody Pea "stamped up and down the South preaching to whatever crowd he could draw" (GS, p. 225). For years he tries to persuade the Gospel Singer to hold a meeting with him. Finally he gets a tent big enough for "three thousand immortal souls," and, without the Gospel Singer's knowledge, strikes a bargain with Didymus. Just before their entrance onto the tent's stage, he attempts to make a deal with the Gospel Singer and sees himself as a real businessman haggling with the Singer over percentages of the take. The Gospel Singer, realizing that his whole life has been one "deal" after another, has no interest in the discussion. Ironically, the Reverend Woody Pea keeps making what he supposes to be compromises and settles for a 25-75% split, the real drawing card getting the bigger share. The Reverend Woody Pea's function is simply to set a standard, as it were—to serve as typical representative of the fundamentalist preacher—and to aid in advancing the plot by providing in the climactic scene an enormous tent filled with freaks.

More interesting, more significant, and more bizarre, as a character and a sort of preacher, is Didymus—murderer, madman, entrepreneur, religious fanatic, brilliant and powerful controller of human affairs, Christ-maker.<sup>18</sup> Many details provide consistent evidence that Catholicism plays an important role in Didymus's religion—his clerical collar, his fasts, and his belief in the mortification of the flesh as penance, as we have seen. Didymus also talks like a preacher at all times. Though he does not stand in the pulpit, he considers his mission in life the saving of souls through the Gospel Singer; and he preaches a great deal to the Gospel Singer, trying to force him into preaching and healing. As Didymus says to the Singer's father at the family's dinner:

"The body is a mirror of the soul. . . . A man that fattens himself tempts ruination."

"And a man that ain't eatin caint be a man that's workin," said his father.

"There's work and there's work," said Didymus. "My work is souls."

"Mine's pigs," said his father. (GS, pp. 101-02)

Didymus, though not the typical Southern fundamentalist (or indeed anything else typical), is a preacher of sorts. Certainly he is a religious fanatic, if a thoroughly mad one. His religion is the Gospel Singer, whom he sees as a Christ figure.

More typical and true to reality is Willalee Bookatee Hull, the black preacher who has murdered MaryBell and is in jail trying to understand his crime before he is lynched for supposedly raping her. He knows that, if he can see and talk to the Gospel Singer, he will understand and be able to remember why he stabbed her. He eventually remembers that he has murdered MaryBell because of her blasphemy against God *and* the Gospel Singer. Ironically, he is moved to murder by his desire to protect that which he sees as sacred and to destroy that which is evil. Willalee Bookatee is the only regular preacher in the novel who is treated with genuine respect.<sup>19</sup> He is sincere and good, yet even his goodness is ironical and ill-informed; thus, he builds his church to the Gospel Singer and prays to him as though he were Christ. Unlike his white counterparts, Willalee Bookatee does not busy himself with seeking large audiences, large numbers of converts, and large collections. He is a holy man. In fact, Willalee finally becomes a Christ figure; just before his death, Willalee, rather than the Gospel Singer, exclaims "Lord, forgive them." By contrast, the Gospel Singer, a false Christ figure, cries, true to form in his honesty, "Damn you, damn you all to hell!" (*GS*, p. 238).

The Gospel Singer, like Everyman, has his Enigma to escape, but, unlike Everyman, he has been given "a gift" by which to escape. Unfortunately, the cost is high. Instead of being allowed to sing his gospel hymns and live his own life, he is continually pressured to perform the role of preacher, healer, and savior. His protest and attempted rebellion constitute the conflict of the novel. He has to fight Mr. Keene, a manager who delights in the growing rumors of his power to heal; Didymus, who constantly pressures him to make use of his second gift, healing; his family, all of whom want him either to help them escape Enigma or to return and work there; MaryBell, who originally is "saved" by the Gospel Singer and who, because he will not marry her and help her escape Enigma, turns to evil and contributes to his corruption and final destruction; the poor afflicted, who importune with their appeals to be healed; Foot, who follows him with his Freak Fair to profit from the crowds; and God, whose pressures the Gospel Singer's rebels against and corrupts into sins of the flesh. The poor Gospel Singer, harried from every side, is a simple fellow who wishes good to everyone. Strong young animal that he is, he seeks escape from the total Enigma in sex, his symbol of revolt. But nothing succeeds: he cannot escape Didymus, MaryBell, the family, the people who want him to be more than he knows he is, or God. His conflict with all of them is interesting, but perhaps his conflict with himself is more so.

Hating to return to Enigma but drawn there by his need for MaryBell, he dreads the people's "whispering impossible requests in his ears" and feels "castrated by his inability to relieve their suffering" (*GS*, p. 53). He protests constantly at being credited with powers that he does not have. His protest is twofold: he does not want to convert people, let alone be a minister, and he does not want to practice "the laying on of hands."

"You must never forget who you are," said Didymus.

"I know who I am," he said. "I sing gospel anywhere anybody'll pay me to sing. I've made a hell of a lot of money and I'm going to make a hell of a lot more."

"You fight it," Didymus said. "But it's in the nature of the gift to fight it."

"My gift is singing songs, gospel songs, and I've never fought it."

"I mean the other gift," said Didymus.

"You mean women," said the Gospel Singer, pushing a laugh out of his throat.

"No," Didymus said. "You know. I mean . . ."

"I forbid you to say it, Didymus."

"All right then, keep me quiet," said Didymus. "But you can't bury what I know, and what you know, in silence, nor in the earth, nor in your heart. I . . ."

"I said silence!"

"All right." (*GS*, pp. 46-47)

Even at the beginning of his career Mr. Keene, in his excitement over the financial prospects brought on by the conversion of MaryBell, had been able to rouse his own enthusiasm by citing the prospect of immense wealth; now the Gospel Singer inwardly protests: "What was that beside having to face these poor maimed people whom he could not help, but who would not believe it even if he told them, and insisted upon the right to touch him and love him?" (*GS*, p. 105). The Gospel Singer is honest with himself and with others whenever he is given the opportunity to speak out. Yet his protestations count for nothing.

Though never desiring to play the role of converter, he does convert more and more people — at first only MaryBell, then eight rows of people in Waycross, Georgia, simultaneously before he had even finished one song, then more and more: ". . . a greater number of sinners began falling before his voice. He saved souls right and left. He couldn't open his mouth in church without some fool falling in a swoon, crying that he had found God" (*GS*, p. 145). His voice and his beauty make him "God's own living symbol in the land" (*GS*, p. 71). Pressured as he is, he realizes that perhaps he does not have a choice in the matter of saving and healing. "He was rapidly coming to the place where he believed, against his will, that he might be what the world said he was. It was frightening! It threatened to ruin everything!" (*GS*, p. 146). Then, during the mass conversion at Waycross, he experiences an epiphany: if he continues to sin against MaryBell, "laying her as regular as breathing," he cannot be the holy man people think him, and "MaryBell became his sure and steady defense against God" (*GS*, p. 146). Furthermore, when harassed by MaryBell to marry her, he rationalizes that, if he does so, he will no longer be a sinner and will be succumbing to the virtuous life with no defense against God; besides, a "single preacher was to his mind an anomaly, a contradiction in terms" (*GS*, p. 150). His escape from being a preacher depends on his remaining single.

At last, driven by Didymus to the final penance, to public confession so that he will be martyred, crucified, and thus saved, he screams his anger at the horde:

"Heal? Heal? I caint heal and I caint save. I never said it. You said that, damn you." The enraged mob responds violently, and both the Gospel Singer and Willalee Bookatee are hanged. After they seize him, the Gospel Singer first recants and promises to heal. Then, regaining his true character, he "thinks to" Willalee Bookatee that he is sorry, and then shouts at the crowd, "Damn you, damn you all to hell!" His shout represents a triumphant recognition about himself and about the mob, for they know exactly what they do, unlike the mob at Calvary.

In the lynching scene Crews, like many Afro-American writers, makes a good deal of the black Christ. Black writers frequently equate lynching and crucifixion, writing about the execution of Christ as a lynching or making the lynch victim into a Christ figure. Willalee Bookatee Hull, as I have suggested, is the pure Christ figure, as his utterance of "Lord forgive them" indicates. Yet this equation is an ironic one, for Willalee has grown to see the Gospel Singer as Christ — has built a church to him, prayed to him, and actually worshiped at his picture.

Didymus, too, is briefly identified as a Christ figure when Crews describes him as "crucified in his own angular delirium" (GS, p. 56). But this equation is also ironic, for, like Willalee, Didymus sees the Gospel Singer as Christ and calls him Master. Of course, if Didymus is an alter ego or doppelganger, he will automatically reflect the Gospel Singer as Christ figure.

Everywhere in the novel the Gospel Singer is presented as a Christ figure, albeit an unwilling one. His hatred for and fear of the Unfortunates is based on frustration because he can do nothing for them regardless of what they believe he is capable of. "He would be forced to stand in their midst, impotent, castrated by his inability to relieve their suffering. All he could do was bleed for them, bleed for their ignorance and the condition of their world" (GS, p. 53). Suffering because he cannot help them, he says repeatedly that at least he will not stare at them. Eventually, of course, he comes to accept Foot and his freaks, to know them as human beings, and thus finally achieves true and full Christlike compassion.

Didymus regards the Gospel Singer as a Christ figure throughout the book. When Didymus and the Gospel Singer arrive at the seventy-thousand-dollar house the Singer has provided for his family (and their hogs), the house is lit with kerosene lamps. The Gospel Singer has Didymus fetch fuses from his car and then goes to the fuse box. The house is instantly flooded with light. The Singer explains that it always happens this way: "They . . . they like to see me do it" (GS, p. 70). The light, of course, is symbolic. Throughout their conversation his siblings refer to the Gospel Singer as *he* and *him*, not capitalized but italicized. He is so special that he needs no name. That same night, "Didymus, violent murderous lover of God, knew that he had followed *his master* into the wilderness, and he was ecstatic that it was so. . . . He wanted to walk, to dash about over the land, . . . and see and touch all that *his master* had seen and touched" (GS, 73-74), and, after the first penance imposed by Didymus, he holds the Gospel Singer in his arms and says, "There, there, *my sweet master*, you are purged" (GS, p. 131; *italics mine*).

Willalee, too, regards the Gospel Singer as Christlike. Willalee spends hours in his jail cell on his knees staring at a photograph of the Gospel Singer, "not praying but calm as prayer in a mindless wonder . . ." (GS, p. 13). He tells the Gospel

Singer, "Everbody knows you power and you glory. . . . White folks know it, colut folks know it. You the way and the salvation. The only hope I got" (*GS*, p. 182). He says he told his congregation that "what she [Marybell] say was the true gospel accordin to the Singer" and that they should follow her orders. The Gospel Singer asks why the people believe Willalee, and he replies, "'Because I's a preacher too.' The Gospel Singer paled. 'Not *too*,' he said. 'Not *too*' " (*GS*, p. 183). Then Willalee Bookatee reveals that with the money the Gospel Singer sent to MaryBell the Negroes have built a church in his name at her suggestion. Willalee Bookatee has been converted by the Gospel Singer over TeeVee — a datable experience, incidentally. As he talks, he stares at the photograph rather than at the Gospel Singer himself. He says that the congregation expects the Gospel Singer at service and that they know "he gone look out on us and say ittas good" (*GS*, p. 187), like God at the creation.

When they visit the church, Didymus and the Gospel Singer find a sign on the roof: THE FIRST CHURCH OF THE GOSPEL SINGER. Didymus insists that it's "your church. God's church founded on *you*" (*GS*, p. 194). Later he says that the Gospel Singer must tell the tent congregation the truth, explaining, "Tell them who you are" (*GS*, p. 196). At such times Didymus is said to speak "shyly," as in reverence, one supposes.

Upon leaving the church, where photographs of the Gospel Singer abound, they go to see Foot, the rational character in the novel. He talks literally about following the Gospel Singer, yet the experience is put in symbolic terms: "It was like something from heaven, a bolt from the blue, so to speak. I knew there was nothing for me to do but follow him" (*GS*, pp. 206-7).

Before the service at the tent Didymus and the Reverend Woody Pea dress the Gospel Singer in flowing "white robes, tied at the waist with a silk rope" (*GS*, p. 228) — the "packaging" that Mr. Keene has invented. Special lighting envelops the Singer. The Reverend Woody Pea "stretched his arms and held himself in a fat crucifix. *He* has come to share with us *his* great gifts" (*GS*, p. 231). When the Gospel Singer realizes what Didymus has in store for him (ultimate penance, public confession, martyrdom), he whispers, "Judas! You bastard Judas!" (*GS*, p. 283). He is betrayed. After the congregation turns mob and destroys its victims, the last scene of the crucifixion shows the body of the Gospel Singer hanging perfectly still with the stained robe on the ground below. Didymus places the "blood-stained" robe under his coat and sets out for the First Church of the Gospel Singer, his mission accomplished. Like all martyrs, the Gospel Singer is saved and on his way to heaven, Didymus believes.

Throughout the novel, then, Crews represents in the character of the Gospel Singer the terrible burden that the southern fundamentalist church places on the majority of its believers. Believers may rebel and escape, but they can do so only temporarily, for the guilt and superstition created by the Calvinist hell-fire-and-damnation church continue their hold, even though believers rationally know better. Such a church gives suffering and pain, not joy, and Crews sees its believers as martyred by the church. Thus, he figures the evil effects of established religion — the madness of the church — in the mad, "fatally sincere" Didymus, who believes



that evil is necessary because of the ultimate punishment (or penance) that saves.

As noted earlier, though religion and its deleterious effects are important in Crews's other novels (indeed, his attack on the fakery of religion is never totally absent from any of them), only in *A Feast of Snakes* does he again give the southern religion specifically a substantial role. In this novel Victor, a snake-handling preacher from Virginia, serves as something of a foil to the mass of degenerates who are its leading characters. These degenerates are again as grotesque as anything that McCullers or O'Connor has to offer: when they have exhausted all the novelty of drinking, drugs, and kinky sex, one of the majorette daughters of the well-to-do doctor makes Joe Lon put her down into the rattlesnake pit and join her there with the snakes. The amputee sheriff uses a rattlesnake to frighten the Negro girl Lottie Mae into submitting to his lust: he gives her the choice of him or the huge rattler which he heads toward her jail cell. The girl is literally frightened out of her mind, so that the next time he forces her into the sheriff's car and exposes himself, she sees his tumescent penis as a snake, pulls out her sharply honed razor, and slices it off. The final scene shows Joe Lon, having gone berserk with a shotgun and killed several people, thrown into the snake pit which has just been filled with the day's enormous catch, the most successful roundup ever. "He fell into the boiling snakes, went under and came up, like a swimmer breaking water. Snakes hung from his face" (*FS*, p. 177). Joe Lon's old daddy, a deacon in the Church of Jesus Christ with Signs Following, in addition to being so mean to his wife that she commits suicide, trains his pit bulldogs on a treadmill until they are bloody and beyond exhaustion. When his favorite backs away from his opponent in the pit, the old man kicks him to death in front of the crowd. Even the Mystic folk are amazed.

These are only a few of the charmers who appear in the book. In contrast to them the snake-handling preacher, Victor, is a sincere believer whom Joe Lon in his superstitious fear of God — "believing as he did, in the total mystery, power, and majesty of God . . ." (*FS*, p. 57) — respects and fears as the only person who does not suffer from association with him. For Joe Lon beats his wife, rapes her, and helps torture an old man who has come to the roundup. He is as mean as his father. Yet Joe Lon is affected by Victor, knowing he himself is wrong in all he does. Actually, he loves his wife and suffers so from mistreating her that he howls like a dog in the agony of his shame. His wrongdoings are the result of his frustrations at having been the Boss Rattler of the Mystic football team and never having got around to learning to read. Consequently, he could not go on to college on a football scholarship and feels that his life is ruined, shoddy, and second-rate. Victor's relationship with Joe Lon is much like that between Didymus and the Gospel Singer; Victor acts as Joe Lon's conscience.

Victor is introduced early in the novel, when Joe Lon and his crony Willard encounter the preacher making his annual visit to buy rattlesnakes for his church, for he can handle only those snakes caught by strangers. When Willard insults the elderly preacher, Joe Lon protests. "Leave him alone. Christ, he's speckled as a guinea hen from rattlesnake bits. He . . . he . . . Willard, he *believes* all that stuff about the snake and God" (*FS*, p. 76). Victor's really *believing* is a strong contrast

to what Joe Lon has seen in the Church of Jesus Christ with Signs Following. Later, while in a weight-lifting contest with Willard and a lawyer from Gainesville, Florida, Joe Lon watches Victor sitting in front of his Airstream, reading the Bible. He remembers that Victor used to stay at their house. "Victor never talked of anything but God and snakes and his voice and the look in his eyes always made Joe Lon's heart jump" (p. 101). Joe Lon's father had visited Victor's church and told Joe Lon how it was: "He strings diamondbacks in his hair like a lady strings ribbons. I seen'm kiss a snake and a snake kiss him. He's been bit in the mouth. He's been bit everywhere. It ain't no more'n a kiss from his ma. He follers where God leads him" (*FS*, p. 101). Joe Lon contrasts his empty life with that of Victor, who follows God "relentlessly and with great joy" (*FS*, p. 102). Football had once filled his life in the same way, but he no longer has it.

Victor also appears to the Negro girl Lottie Mae, just before the sheriff forces her to enter his car. Victor cries: "Snakes, not sons, wreathing around the bones of Tiri! God hath said ye shall not eat of it. Neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, ye shall not surely die!" (*FS*, p. 124). Victor's hair, described as "white and full twisted in tight coils all over his head and down his back" (*FS*, p. 76), reminds Lottie Mae of snakes, and she goes on toward her fate: "... she knew he [the sheriff] had brought the snake she had been waiting for, or maybe the snake had brought him. It did not matter. She would have to deal with the snake. She was the one" (*FS*, p. 125). And she does deal with it, with her sharp razor.

As the sheriff bleeds to death on the way to the hospital, he tries to send Joe Lon a message, and when the incomplete message is being delivered, Joe Lon is terrified. He looks up to see Victor and his constant companion Mother Well, who makes mosaics of the snakes' rattles, coming toward him. Victor begins to preach, and Joe Lon, in a panic, begins to howl. He has to be subdued with a hypodermic. Victor is really offering to buy his snakes, but it seems to Joe Lon that Victor is coming after him, the sinner, the snake himself.

After the drug-induced rest, Joe Lon returns to the roundup. There he sees Victor, stripped to the waist, bend over and search through the pockets of his coat on the ground, straighten up holding a rattlesnake in each hand, and again start to preach. Joe Lon joins his sister in total madness. He shoots Victor through the throat. Then he shoots others, including his high school girl friend. And he is relieved. "He felt better than he had ever felt in his life" (*FS*, p. 176). He has got rid of his conscience, his guilt, and the cause of his guilt. Finally, in the snake pit, Joe Lon bears the scars of Victor, the only person he could admire.

In *A Feast of Snakes* Crews again deals with Southern religion; again his protagonist resists its claims; and again that protagonist cannot escape its powers. Like Willalee Bookatee, Victor, the novel's sincere and honest preacher, is martyred. Like Didymus, Victor, representative of organized religion, is incomprehensible and mad. Yet Victor also provides for Joe Lon a kind of insight into the meaninglessness and horror of his own life; through Victor, Joe Lon can also see the possibility of a better alternative.

Crews prides himself on being a believer, but his books never place organized religion — certainly not the fundamentalist Southern Protestant church — in anything like a good light. Crews has had to find his own way, and it has not apparently been easy for him. Even now he declares, “[Religion] is a thing with which I flagellate myself more than a little.”<sup>20</sup> In that sense, Crews is like James Joyce, who was also never quite able to escape his own religious background. While Crews mocks and satirizes many aspects of Southern fundamentalist belief, the values he upholds in his novels seem to be Christian ones. Certainly, in his works life is hard, a vale of tears, and man is a limited and fallen creature whose only triumph would seem to be the recognition of that state and perhaps the achievement of compassion for his fellows.

**7. The Athlete's Hand Filling Up:  
Harry Crews and Sports  
Donald Johnson**

In the epigraph to his first novel Harry Crews declares his interest in the role of the hero in a world where traditional moral ideologies have broken down. He declares, "Men to whom God is dead worship one another."<sup>1</sup> That work, *The Gospel Singer*, explores the consequences of one man's assumption of the heroic burden for the spiritually starved townspeople of Enigma, Georgia. While the man called the Gospel Singer denies possessing any supernatural powers, his admirers, eager to lay claim to even a faint glimmer of hope from the world beyond, endow him with the ability to comfort the grief-stricken, uplift the condemned, and heal the afflicted. The crowd's adulation turns to revulsion, however, when they learn that their spiritual insurance policy is particularly susceptible to the sins of the flesh. In their rage at his vulnerability (and by extension, their own) they lynch him.

In his subsequent works Crews has continued to explore man's peculiar fate as a creature who longs for spiritual breakthroughs while bound to a body destined to decay. In Ernest Becker's terms, "He is out of nature and helplessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-thumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill marks to prove it."<sup>2</sup> The body determines the range and quality of our movements, registers our weaknesses through sickness and torments us with the filth and stench of its waste products — our own evident links with our bestial past. Only the mind, through creating personal, or accepting cultural, illusions, can alleviate the dread generated by the prospect of our creatureliness, our death. When our private dream is threatened or disintegrates, we turn to heroes whose acts of defiance and perfection apparently deny death and reinforce our ties with things eternal.

More often than not, our illusions are impossible to maintain. We are drawn to the ideal but rooted in the real, and Harry Crews, never one to obscure hard truths, confronts us again and again with the cold fact of our mortality. In four different works Crews repeats a maxim that reduces the fundamental paradox of the human condition to a few words and leaves no doubt as to his attitude toward it. Inclined to dream, wish, fantasize, or believe, we are told (with slight variations) to "Wish in

one hand and shit in the other. See which one fills up first."<sup>3</sup> The unendurable weight of this truth destroys Joe Lon Mackey in Crews's *A Feast of Snakes*, but the truth alone need not produce "despair. Only when we are conditioned to see ourselves solely in heroic terms, when we are unable to accept our illusions as "trenches for the defense of . . . existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality,"<sup>4</sup> are we rendered helpless in our struggle with the world. On the other hand, once we can honestly confront our finitude, admit our inability to overcome the terror of death, we can begin to experience life. As Becker says, we can arrive "at a new possibility, at new reality, by the destruction of the self through facing up to the anxiety of the terror of existence. The self must be destroyed, brought down to nothing, in order for self-transcendence to begin. Then the self can begin to relate itself to powers beyond itself."<sup>5</sup> Becker's analysis comes very close to summarizing the experience undergone by John Kaimon in Crews's *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*.

It is no accident that both *A Feast* and *Karate* focus on the sports figure. Since *The Gospel Singer*, in fact, Crews has turned with increasing frequency to the world of sports as a source of characters who not only function as heroes for others but who also undergo their own crises when faced with their paradoxical roles as self-conscious animals or defecating gods. Biographical considerations aside, the reason for Crews's interest in the athlete is fairly obvious. The sports figure, more than any other character in our culture, epitomizes the duality of mind and body which is at the heart of the human condition. Physically gifted, he leads us out of ourselves through acts which seem to defy the laws of nature. At the same time, dependent as he is upon physical exploits as vehicles for transcendence, he is a victim of the very body that captivates his audience. His heroics are bound to a self-consuming organism destined to decay.

Crews's long line of athletic figures demonstrates both the potential and the actual liberation of the human spirit through sports. Jester, the physically perfect jockey of *Naked in Garden Hills*, escapes the dust and monotony of Garden Hills through dreams of the race he no longer has the courage to ride. Even Fat Man in the same novel, though far from athletic, might be seen as the jock manque. He wears custom-made running shorts while monitoring the workouts of his hero, the college cross-country star, and he identifies fully with the runner's struggle to transcend his physical limitations. Crews writes:

A long-distance runner could have no other honorable goal than to want to run forever. Fat Man could understand that. He, himself, had never had any other desire than to put everything outside himself inside himself, to put that world in his stomach. And he had known for a long time that he was not alone in such dreams.<sup>6</sup>

Fat Man's desire to control the world by ingesting it foreshadows the efforts of another athlete manque, Herman Mack of *Car*, to achieve immortality by eating an automobile. Like other heroes, Herman "had always felt himself special, felt himself being saved by a force bigger than himself and outside himself, saved to

do some fantastic and special things that would set him apart from other men."<sup>7</sup> Quite appropriately, Herman responds to his father's questions about his motive for wanting to eat an automobile with the traditional answer of the mountain climber. He wants to eat a new Ford Maverick "because it is there."<sup>8</sup> The spectacle even takes on the character of a contemporary trash sport when it is slated for Sunday afternoon presentation on ABC's "Wide World of Sports."

When Marvin Molar, the legless deaf-mute of *The Gypsy's Curse*, is burdened, he can rise above the world through exercise. Describing the routine, he says, "I had put on my suit and gone out there to get outside myself. One of the things I've found in my life is that in a tortured muscle there's a kind of peace you can't find anywhere else."<sup>9</sup> To keep from thinking about Hester, the "normal" woman he loves (and distrusts), he competes with Russell Muscle in the gym until they are both "lost in a sweaty, mindless world when only the next exercise was important."<sup>10</sup>

From his own experience Crews illustrates the body's capacity to go beyond itself with an incident that occurred on a hike down the Appalachian Trail. Faced with being pushed off a high rock in a suicidal run down a waterfall at night, he determines that the only way to escape the situation alive is to incapacitate his companion who is insisting on the plunge. Even though he had studied karate, he admits that he was "never very good. Karate takes among other things the balance of a ballet dancer. With my gimp legs, I have no balance at all. I'd never been able to make an Okinawan reverse roundhouse kick work in my life."<sup>11</sup> But there above the dark waterfall, faced with serious injury, if not death, he spins into a flawless roundhouse kick, catching the other man "directly over the heart. He didn't make a sound, only a soft explosion of air from his mouth, and went straight down like he'd been struck in the head with a hammer."<sup>12</sup> Given Crews's lameness, the act defies reality or logic. As he sums up the experience: "That night on the rock in Tennessee, I stood over Pudd, the calm and perfect karate master I'm not and never have been."<sup>13</sup>

While describing the athlete's ability to go beyond nature, Crews prefers to focus on the sports figure as an individual whose physical gifts heighten his awareness of his body as burden. Anxiety over the body's limitations is particularly prevalent among washed-up jocks, aging athletes such as Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, Irwin Shaw's Christian Darling, or Fred Exley's Frank Gifford. Joe Lon Mackey, the protagonist of *A Feast of Snakes*, is such a figure. Mackey's moment of glory, and his only glimpse of life beyond the absolute physicality of Mystic, Georgia, has already passed when the novel opens. It came in his reign as high school football hero, "Boss Snake" of the Mystic High School Rattlers. Although Joe Lon has moved beyond high school, he will never go on to play college football since he is a functional illiterate. He can anticipate spending the rest of his life tending his father's country store and running a campground that fills up once a year during the town's annual rattlesnake hunt. Like Rabbit Angstrom, he feels trapped by his family, a wife whose rotting teeth disgust him and two children whose crying and messing drive him to distraction. His only relief from the "settled life" comes through heavy drinking, reminiscing about the sex and violence of his high school

career, and an occasional direct challenge from Willard Miller, the current "Boss Snake" at the high school. Not only does Miller constitute a direct physical threat to Mackey, he also threatens to eradicate the town's memory of Joe Lon by setting new records in football and track. Against the backdrop of the yearly snake hunt, Joe Lon confronts the hollowness of that memory and the utter vulnerability of the body he had depended upon for security. Feeling betrayed by the body and lacking a dream for the future, he finally goes berserk, killing four people with a shotgun before he is overwhelmed and thrown among the writhing snakes in the collecting pit.

On an immediate, literal level, Joe Lon's killing spree is an attempt to strike down the world that is leaving him behind. Willard has replaced him as "Boss Snake" and may one day cripple him. Berenice Sweet, the former Miss Mystic Rattler and Joe Lon's partner in adolescent sexual revels, has gone off to the university where she has become engaged to a member of the debate team. When she returns home for the snake festival, Berenice disappoints Joe Lon, who had expected them to pick up where they had left off in high school, by bringing her fiancé with her. Predictably, Joe Lon, who doesn't know what a debate team is, reacts like a territorial animal, reducing the college man to a "second string lardass on the debate team. Well, Mr. CriscoKid," he thinks, "it may be you go one on one with Joe Lon Mackey before you get out of Mystic, Georgia. It may be that you got yourself in more shit than you can stir with a stick."<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, the latter comment applies more directly to Joe Lon than to Berenice's fiancé, and it locates the source of his anxiety and rage at a much deeper, more existential level while also accounting for the severity of his reaction. As *A Feast of Snakes* unfolds, its protagonist is gradually overwhelmed by a rising flood of excrement. When the novel opens, Joe Lon's main concern is that a number of portable toilets be installed on the campground to accommodate the campers: "There would be a beauty contest. Miss Mystic Rattler. And shit. Human shit in quantities that nobody could believe" (*FS*, p. 17). Mackey's friend and role model, Sheriff Buddy Matlow, the best defensive end Georgia Tech ever had and a consensus All-American, lost a leg in Southeast Asia when he stepped on a "punjy stick that had been dipped in Veet Nam Fese shit" (*FS*, p. 15). When Joe Lon visits his sister Beeder, who apparently suffers from hysterical shock initiated by their mother's suicide, he picks up her chamber pot in order to empty it. Looking down, he fixes his gaze upon Beeder's excrement floating in the dark water. He feels like howling.

Allen Shepherd in an article entitled "Matters of Life and Death: The Novels of Harry Crews," remarks that Joe Lon "howls a good deal."<sup>15</sup> He goes on to suggest that Mackey's responses to his plight seem "in excess of the grisly facts as we know them."<sup>16</sup> But Joe Lon's howling is as much a symptom of his predicament as a reaction to it. Again, Becker is helpful. "The anus," he says, "and its incomprehensible, repulsive product represents not only physical determinism and boundness, but the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death."<sup>17</sup> Further, "Excreting is the curse that threatens madness because it shows man his abject finitude, his physicalness, the likely unreality of his hopes and dreams. But even

more immediately, it represents man's utter bafflement at the sheer non-sense of creation."<sup>18</sup> Seen in this light, Joe Lon's howling is an expression of the creatureliness to which he has been reduced, as well as a protest against it.

Consider, for example, the scene in which the community at large first becomes aware of Mackey's instability. Most of the novel's major characters have gathered to watch a fight between Joe Lon's father's pit bull, Tuffy—a scarred veteran about to be taken off the circuit—and a younger challenger. The parallels between Joe Lon and the old canine champion should not go unnoticed. As Joe Lon himself points out, "Daddy's looking to retire Tuff. He knows he gone retire Tuff, and old Tuff's gone be the boss stud of all the pits" (*FS*, p. 58). As he readies the dog for battle, he is visited by a succession of characters, all of them bearing bad news: Berenice says she has revealed Joe Lon's continuing sexual interest in her to Elfie, his wife; Shep, Berenice's fiancé, provides a detailed description of Buddy Matlow's death following his castration (in Freudian terms, the ultimate symbol of the body's vulnerability); and finally, Victor, a snake-handling preacher, booms out a prophetic message which is too much for Mackey to bear. When Victor intones a catalogue of creatures that will witness the Apocalypse—"lion tiger horse elephant eagle dove fly worm and the wondrous *serpent* . . ." (*FS*, p. 159)—Joe Lon cracks, letting his head "drop back on his shoulders" and howling "directly into the blue sunless sky." A friend yells, "Don't go crazy, Joe Lon! Don't go crazy!" And the dogs, as if in kinship and sympathy, begin to yelp too. They are "so stirred up by all the howling and hollering" that they are "going crazy in their cages. Even Tuffy [is] howling, his head back, looking into the same blue empty piece of sky with Joe Lon" (*FS*, p. 160). In comment that seems frighteningly appropriate to Joe Lon's situation, Becker writes:

. . . to become conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism is the main self-analytic problem of life. Everything painful and sobering in what psychoanalytic genius and religious genius have discovered about man revolves around the terror of admitting what one is doing to earn his self-esteem. This is why human heroics is a blind drivenness that burns people up; in passionate people, a screaming for glory as uncritical and reflexive as the howling of the dog.<sup>19</sup>

When Tuffy loses the dog fight and the elder Mackey stomps him to death, the message to Joe Lon is clear: old victories, no matter how glorious, are meaningless. That his fate is somehow bound up with the dead pit bull's becomes clear to Joe Lon when he takes Tuffy out "by a storm-blasted pine tree" to leave him for the buzzards. He watches him "for a long moment lying there with the blood still damp on his scarred body." He then drives home, puts himself "carefully on the bed beside Elfie," and goes "carefully to sleep," accepting for the first time that "things would not be different tomorrow. Or ever. Things go different for some people. But for some they did not. There were a lot of things you could do though. One of them was to go nuts trying to pretend things would someday be different. That was one of the things he did not intend to do" (*FS*, p. 170).



Mackey's bestial expression of his anxiety might be seen as excessive only if the reader fails to consider Joe Lon's illiteracy, his inability to articulate the genuine terror he experiences. Even had he "skill in speech," who would listen? Who among the drunken rednecks, crazed snake hunters, and nymphomaniacal beauty queens that surround him could summon up the sympathy or understanding Joe Lon needs? Given the circumstances, Crews's protagonist, who is not stupid, is reduced to an ever-deepening contemplation of his dilemma. Competing in an impromptu weight-lifting contest with Willard and Duffy Deeter, a macho lawyer who has come to Mystic for the snake hunt, Joe Lon goes down on the bench for his turn and begins to think: "*What am I doing here on my back? What is this I'm doing? I'm a grown man with two babies and a wife and I'm out here fucking around with weights. What the hell ails me?*" (FS, p. 101). Seeing the preacher, Victor, across the campground talking to a woman who spends her life creating mosaics out of snake rattles, he wonders:

What did he, Joe Lon do? What did he have? He had once had football to fill up his mind and his body and his days and so he had never thought about it. Then one day football was gone and it took everything with it. He kept thinking something else would surely take its place but nothing ever did. He stumbled from one thing to the next thing. From wife to babies to making a place for crazy campers bent on catching snakes. But nothing gave him anything back. So here he was lying under a dead weight doing what he'd done five years ago, when he was a boy. If it had meant anything then, he had forgotten what; and merciful god, it meant nothing now. (FS, p. 101)

It is obvious that Joe Lon is burdened by more than a three-hundred-pound barbell. The snake hunt serves to consolidate and focus his real burden. Normal patterns of behavior are disrupted. Violence in an already brutal environment is heightened. The whole area fills up with excrement. Then there are the snakes, symbols of evil, hissing reminders of man's animal energy, agents of death. As Mackey sits in his truck just moments before his shooting spree, Crews tells us that "everywhere in front of them, the dark silhouettes of men were joined to the earth by the thick stretched bodies of snakes" (FS, p. 175).

Earlier that morning Joe Lon had told his sister that he had had enough of snake hunters: "I've seen more of them than I want to see. . . . I wish we didn't have to do this. I wish I'd never heard of a rattlesnake" (p. 173). Beeder replies, "Daddy would say to wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up first." Joe Lon then says, "I know what Daddy would say" (FS, p. 173).

And he knows what it means—death, unmitigated by dreams, illusions, or art. Ironically, Joe Lon's last defense against death is to become its agent. Stepping from his truck he takes up his shotgun and in quick succession kills Victor, the deputy sheriff, Berenice, and an anonymous snake hunter, feeling "better than he had ever felt in his life. Christ, it was good to be in control again" (FS, p. 176). But his momentary control is illusory. Delivering death, controlling others' lives, is not tantamount to controlling one's own, as Joe Lon quickly learns when the crowd rushes him, picks him up and hurls him into the boiling mass of snakes.

The body/mind dichotomy is built into Crews's fourth novel, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*. Through fierce discipline and rigorous training, the karateka, the student of karate, liberates his body from this world. "Breathe. Breathe in and out," a brown belt instructor tells her pupils:

In deeply . . . deeply . . . deeply . . . deeply . . . then out . . . out . . . on out. And with the breath breathe out the ills and the failings of the flesh, breathe out the heart that flutters, the eyes that will not see, the ears that will not hear . . . breathe out the bowels that *will not*, the kidneys that *cannot*, the blood that *must not*. . . . Bowels, kidneys and blood are things of this world. Karate is a thing of the spirit. Breathe out the world and I will fill you full of the spirit.<sup>20</sup>

This is the lesson John Kaimon seeks to learn in his sojourn at a bizarre karate *dojo* in an abandoned motel outside Miami. Kaimon is a sixties wanderer who arrives at the Sun 'N Fun Motel after having attached himself to one cause or another throughout the country in an effort to belong somewhere or to someone. His only tie with his Oxford, Mississippi, roots manifests itself in a picture of William Faulkner he has painted on his sweatshirt. He doesn't *understand* Faulkner, hasn't even *read* Faulkner, yet the man represents for him a mystery he feels compelled to solve. In the opening scenes of the novel, when Kaimon stumbles upon the karate students working out on a secluded beach, the totemic jersey provides his only sense of identity, a weak identity at best, one destined to undergo severe tests through Kaimon's encounters with the strange array of characters Crews assembles in the hot Florida sun. First there is Belt, the *dojo* master, who speaks in *koans* and who, himself, admires almost to the point of worship a karate master named Jefferson Davis Munroe, whose execution is flawless but whose blows are relatively ineffective since he is a midget. For Kaimon the most important resident of the *dojo* is Gaye Nell Odell, a beauty queen capable of splitting a man's head with either hand. She has been Miss Cranberry Sauce, Miss Sun and Ice, and Queen of the Sand. She is currently the Dania Beach Most Beautiful Girl in the World. Other characters include Lazarus, a middle-aged man who has abandoned a successful business career to devote himself to Belt, a nameless brown belt with a glass eye who has been ejected from the school for breathing the breath of little girls, and an assortment of gays and transvestites who are attracted to Kaimon.

When Kaimon first presents himself to Belt and his pupils, he tells them: "I want to get in your game. . . . My game is getting into other people's games" (*KTS*, p. 33). But only later, when he has become deeply involved, does he realize that "Belt believed absolutely that a man had to kill whatever he was to become a karateka" (*KTS*, p. 118). Kaimon's education is calculated to bring about this annihilation of self. Through a series of ego-deflating experiences he is reduced to a creature he does not know, living in a world where ordinary reality is suspect.

Belt is not only a karate master; he is also a master psychologist. Even when he cannot completely control Kaimon's instruction, he contrives situations in which his new pupil's behavior will be wholly predictable. Kaimon's perceptions of

reality are challenged in his first meal at the *dojo*. Expecting a baloney sandwich, he faces instead small cups of pills and a jug of high protein sauce:

They had pills they called green leafy vegetables. They had pills they called red meat. They had pills they called milk. They had pills they called fresh fruit . . . the way Belt said *green leafy vegetables* made it sound like those little brown pills . . . *were* green leafy vegetables, so he had doggedly asked for more and doggedly eaten them, but strain as he would to believe otherwise, they remained brown pills, dry as dust in his mouth and utterly tasteless. (KTS, p. 48)

The degree to which he becomes able to taste vegetables, milk, meat, and fruit in the pills constitutes a register of Kaimon's susceptibility to Belt's reality.

John Kaimon's first direct instruction takes place in the motel's dry swimming pool where Gaye Nell Odell, by playing upon a combination of his desire and misogyny, coaxes him to alternately touch her body and then strike the padded *makawari* boards used to toughen the karateka's hands. Kaimon's blows become so violent that his hands are battered to the point of requiring casts. Rendered virtually helpless by this self-inflicted beating, Kaimon has to depend upon others for food, drink, even help in dressing. He blames Gaye Nell (and, by extension, all women) for his plight, so that when Lazarus takes him to a nightclub in Miami, his only desire is to redeem his masculinity at some other woman's expense. Ironically, because he is careless in his vengeful state of mind, he falls into a trap and is himself raped—by two female impersonators. To add insult to injury, when he grudgingly recounts the incident to Gaye Nell Odell, *she* rapes him, "without passion" as Kaimon puts it. After allowing him to demonstrate how one's passions can lead one to disaster, she demonstrates, through the passionless rape, her own ability to separate mind and body, feeling and sex. Unfortunately, her aspiring karateka, still passion-bound, slams his arms to the floor in a fit of orgasmic excitement and shatters both casts.

Nearly crippled, his worldview and self-image shaken, Kaimon further alienates himself from his past by painfully shaving his beard and all his hair and going into the kitchen and wolfing down more pills and high protein sauce than even Belt could manage. Thus fortified, he goes out in the blistering Florida sun where his skin is literally burned away in the dry pool as he attacks the two gays who had raped him and mercilessly beats them and fourteen of their friends, totally exhausting himself in the process. He awakens three days later with only vague memories of the "slaughter" in the pool, but with a vivid memory of "a pill that turned into a strawberry on his tongue" (KTS, p. 116). It seems as if the palingenesis is complete. When he looks in the mirror, he does not know himself: "Skin hung from his head, from his face, from his neck. Thin curling strips of dead diaphonous skin. He looked in the terminal stages of some unnameable disease. . . . Something cold ran in his chest and he was afraid" (KTS, p. 119). With some effort he recalls a vision he had experienced while asleep, a vision of Dhourma, the monk who had brought karate from India to China. But at this point he glances up at the Faulkner

jersey and realizes he "had given up one mystery for another, and it looked as though he never would know anything" (*KTS*, p. 121).

Kaimon is quite clearly illustrating the "self brought down to nothing." Unlike Joe Lon Mackey, however, he envisions a world beyond the immediate and finite, though he despairs of ever knowing anything about that world. Ironically, the "powers beyond himself" to which Kaimon eventually relates arise not in the mist-shrouded Himalayas of Dhourma the karate monk, but in the muscular abdomen of Gaye Nell Odell.

The brief, "passionless" liaison between the white belt and the brown belt result in a pregnant beauty queen, a fact which Gaye Nell reveals to John Kaimon while Belt (who is ignorant about the pregnancy) is systematically delivering practice kicks to her stomach. "Baby," she says. "Life." And when Kaimon repeats the words, she says, "Your . . . baby . . . is . . . hanging [she stops for breath] . . . in . . . the . . . lining . . . of . . . my . . . stomach" (*KTS*, p. 126). Her revelation marks the real turning point in Kaimon's development. From this point on, try as he may to adopt the ways of the spirit, John Kaimon commits himself increasingly to the things of this world. To begin with, he quite unceremoniously knocks Belt in the pool.

Kaimon is troubled that Gaye Nell, who wants to maintain her status as both brown belt karateka and beauty queen, thinks of terminating the pregnancy. While meditating, in an effort to reestablish tranquility after striking the master, he struggles to banish a vision of Jefferson Davis Munroe, the midget, reduced to the size of a dime, a baby who "seized the red membrane of his eye and held on for life. His feet dangled. His mouth stretched. He was screaming for his life but there was no sound" (*KTS*, p. 136).

Clearly, the physical reality of the fetus growing in Gaye Nell's uterus is beginning to impinge upon the reality represented by Belt's spirituality, and Kaimon, who was with some difficulty being assimilated into Belt's world, becomes even more disoriented. In an extended discussion about the discrepancy between belief and truth, Belt tries to convince his pupil that "all things become simple in the spirit of karate." And when the master advocates the zenlike meditation upon a simple object such as a stone in order that Kaimon feel "the mystery that's big enough to hold us all," the white belt argues that Faulkner is mystery enough, that he has carried Faulkner's face all over America and still doesn't know a thing. When Belt replies that the answer is inside, that he must "go inside and find it in the spirit," Kaimon's response indicates that for him belief and reality are the same: "John Kaimon couldn't really think about the inside of himself. Or rather he couldn't think of it in a way that seemed important. All that came to him were images of veins and arteries and livers and other large damp organs that went squish squish squish in places cast in the perpetually pink haze of blood" (*KTS*, p. 144).

The passage points to Kaimon's eventual rejection of the spirit in favor of the flesh, flawed and mortal as it may be. Though he maintains the illusion of belonging to the karate group, and even believes for a while that he's beginning to transform the pills into real food through the force of his will, he becomes more and more

tormented by the growing reality of Gaye Nell's baby.

Crews provides an explanation for Kaimon's spiritual odyssey and his seemingly inordinate concern for the unborn child in a dream, or rather a recurrent memory, which plagues the wanderer. Kaimon recalls his aunt, who reared him, explaining over and over again the circumstances surrounding his mother's death in an absurd accident involving a chicken truck. She was killed while still carrying him, so he was, in fact, born after his mother had died. The father suffered a hysterical reaction to the accident and spent the rest of his life in the state asylum. Kaimon, confronted with the fact of death before he had even experienced life, has therefore spent much of his own life in an effort to deny death by affirming the efficacy of the spirit. He has deserted his Mississippi home because of Faulkner, the mystery, he says, but each time he mentions the writer he has a vision of a reality he has turned his back on: "He felt certain he must have left because of all those starving dogs and sick niggers. When he thought of Mississippi, he thought of millions of sick niggers: beside the roads, on the roads, in the bushes, on the roofs of houses, in trees. And in and among the sick niggers walked starving dogs" (*KTS*, p. 138).

The novel's climax, and the final resolution of Kaimon's dilemma in favor of the things of this world, revolves around the annual Dania Beach Fourth of July celebration and beauty contest. Kaimon attends the festivities with Lazarus in order to see Gaye Nell defend her crown. He witnesses, instead, a bizarre spectacle indicative of the vulgarity and brutality of the world in which he lives. The contest is a garish expression of America's obsession with plastic beauty. Spectators drink themselves into a frenzy, then beat each other senseless while waiting for the ceremony to begin, and when it does get underway, they desert the stage for a spectacle more satisfying to their blood lust—the crash of a small airplane just off the beach and the subsequent death of the pilot.

Throughout all this disruption Kaimon focuses almost exclusively upon Gaye Nell and the fetus she is carrying, "*a baby, a baby under assault, a life, a life under assault, his own life under assault*" (*KTS*, p. 171). When the plane crash terminates the contest without a winner being chosen, he goes up on the stage with Gaye Nell, unable to shake from his mind "the image of himself the size of a dime hanging for his life inside there in the wet and dangerous lining of her" (*KTS*, p. 186). But when the stage, which is really a nest of mobile homes, is quickly dismantled and towed back toward Miami to avoid the mob's depredations, he finds himself once again in bed with the brown belt beauty queen, engaging in violent sex at seventy miles an hour. Gaye Nell's only desire, however, is that the violence of their union dislodge the fetus. When Kaimon learns this (after the act) he is overcome with guilt and a sense of his own identity with the mob that had so recently disgusted him:

He was just like they were. He knew that it was the certainty that he was different from other people that had driven him out of Mississippi, away from . . . the ridiculous death of his mother under the wheels of a truck filled with screaming chickens, and the final end of his mad father. It was why he

had put Faulkner on his back and worn him like a tailsman. Faulkner was not like the rest. Or was he? God, what an ultimate irony if he was. (*KTS*, p. 190)

When they return to the *dojo*, Kaimon is determined to stay away from the woman, but he cannot sleep for thinking of the child. Finally he is roused from sleep on this eventful night by the sound of the one-eyed brown belt practicing in the dry pool. Drawn to the sound, he enters the pit and becomes involved in a mock battle which leads to a discussion of belief and truth directly paralleled to the earlier discussion between Kaimon and Belt. The one-eyed karateka explains to Kaimon that he was expelled from the *dojo* because Belt refused to believe the *truth*, that "the breath of little girls grows muscle, increases circulation, develops stamina . . . and doubles the capacity of the brain. *That's the truth* (*KTS*, p. 205). This testimony constitutes the real epiphany for Crews's protagonist, the realization that belief is perhaps more important than truth, that through "an alchemy of the spirit, the sweet breath of little children had been transformed by the will of this small gray man into what he wanted it to be" (*KTS*, p. 205). The telling result of this revelation is not, as one might expect, an affirmation of the will or the spirit, but Kaimon's recognition of the fact that he can never summon up the belief necessary for him to transform anything. While Belt creates spirit from flesh and the one-eyed karateka derives flesh from spirit, Kaimon finally *knows* he is ultimately bound to the flesh. He returns to the motel room and for the first time makes love to Gaye Nell Odell, coaxing the woman out of the hard shell of the karateka beauty queen. He begins by asking, "What does a believer do when there is nothing to believe?" But she doesn't answer. "Apparently she could not," Crews writes:

Her lips were open. He saw into her soft vulnerable mouth. Her breath blew warm on his face. Her breath. Woman girl child breath. That somewhere could turn flesh to iron. That somewhere could split oak. That somewhere could crush bone. All it took was belief. He had seen it, and he knew it. And he also knew he did not believe. The breath of little children would leave his own flesh only flesh. . . . He would walk through the world naked. He would bruise and bleed.

Looking up, seeing Faulkner's face staring down at them, Kaimon admits, "A chicken truck could kill Faulkner . . . and it could kill Belt, too" (*KTS*, p. 209).

Faulkner is vulnerable. Belt is mortal. Kaimon himself is left with only one belief, that Gaye Nell can have his child. He had created heroes to convince himself of his tie with some eternal mystery. In the end, however, he can only affirm a type of serial immortality through the life of his own child. Although this affirmation occurs within the context of a rather conventional romantic ending, Kaimon's vision of life is not that of some bleary-eyed idealist, but a hard-won resolution of the fundamental problem of man's duality, one which incorporates, is perhaps even founded upon, the fact of death.

While Joe Lon Mackey is thrown off balance, tripped into the pit by the sheer weight of the world around him, John Kaimon shifts the burden of mortality from

his hand filling up to his shoulder, and turns back toward life. While he does not achieve a balance of body and spirit, or offer the desperate self to some transcendent consciousness as Becker would have us do, Kaimon looks life in the face after having seen death. Life, with its chicken trucks and starvation, may be nasty and brutish, but its shortness makes love all the more meaningful.

## 8. Crews's Women

Patricia V. Beatty

Surveying the American novel of the last fifteen years, a woman might be moved to the old lament, "How long, O Lord, how long?" The male American novelist has traditionally been unsuccessful in his creation of fully human female characters; the critical commonplace is no less true today, when we have Nurse Ratcheds but still no Anna Kareninas. The masculine mystique which has dominated the American novel ensures that the American male hero most often finds security and comfort only in the company of his own kind. In a number of American novelists this attitude is complemented by an active hostility toward women, either implied or explicitly presented. Women for these writers may be beautiful or ugly, young or old, lover or mother, but they are almost always a threat, something to be feared, struggled against, attacked, or occasionally, succumbed to.

While this male distrust and fear of woman has been explained most often with reference to Freudian psychology and its popularity here both clinically and critically, a Jungian perspective may provide a more precise explication of exactly what is happening in the mind of a male author whose female characters consistently represent aggressive sexuality and a threat to the masculine values he embraces. This is particularly true with an author such as Harry Crews, whose stories of modern Southern life depend heavily on mythic and ritual elements. A talented and serious writer, Crews has created a number of memorable and sympathetic male protagonists, recognizably human in their strengths and weaknesses, their hopes and desires. His minor characters, usually "good country people" and blacks, never fail to move and delight the reader. The energy of some of his best novels, *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes*, especially, comes from their substratum of myth, which charges and elevates his basically ordinary "folk" with significance. But the current runs out of control in the case of Crews's female characters. Women in his novels are seldom fully realized personalities; if they are not *Playboy* centerfolds, they are devouring monsters or pathetic victims of abuse. While illumination of these characters, not psychoanalysis of their creator, is the



present aim, it is difficult not to see his women as male projections common to the American novel. While such a view places Crews in the mainstream of contemporary fiction, this position is a dubious honor, as one may perceive by examining briefly some basic psychological concepts.

In Jungian psychology the individual moves toward maturity through encounters with archetypes, structures in the personality which mark stages of the emerging ego as it travels toward a mature balance of conscious and unconscious elements, what Jung calls individuation. These archetypes operate on both a personal and transpersonal level, that is, both in an individual and in cultures. In the literature of the culture, especially in its myths, the archetypes take recurrent shapes; thus, Jung and, especially, his gifted pupil Erich Neumann discuss the Great Mother, the anima/animus, the Shadow, and so forth, both as cultural archetypes and — when these shapes reveal themselves in individual dreams, fantasies, or stories — as personal stages of development.

The first stage in the personality's individuation occurs as the ego moves toward consciousness, attempting to separate itself from the unconscious, which is represented by the Great Mother. Because the new ego is weak, it reacts ambivalently in this stage; the forces of the unconscious may be regarded as good or evil, signified by the Good Mother as source of abundance and life, or by the Evil Mother as overpowering and destructive.<sup>1</sup> Fear of sinking back into the unconscious projects itself obsessively in a concern with the terrible aspect of the Great Mother and, as Neumann tells us, is characteristic of the adolescent ego.<sup>2</sup> In his comprehensive study of this archetype, *The Great Mother*, Neumann states: "A male immature in his development, who experiences himself only as male and phallic, perceives the feminine as a castrator, a murderer of the phallus. The projection of his own masculine desire and, on a still deeper level, of his own trend toward . . . voluptuous self-dissolution in the primordial Feminine and Motherly, intensifies the terrible character of the feminine."<sup>3</sup>

Signs of domination by this archetype in its earliest stage are worship of the Great Mother in androgynous form<sup>4</sup> and cults of phallic fertility, especially snake worship.<sup>5</sup> For the adolescent, sexuality signifies loss of consciousness and being overcome by the female, a union of sexuality and death; in extreme cases, possession by the savage and bloody aspect of the Great Mother makes itself felt in insanity. Neumann points out that initiation rites at puberty are a means of protection: "Masculine solidarity helps to depotentiate the Great Mother."<sup>6</sup>

Turning from Jung and Neumann to Harry Crews, and more specifically to the women in Crews's novels, I would argue that this psychological struggle, in various forms, is manifest throughout his books. In *The Gospel Singer*, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, *The Gypsy's Curse*, and *A Feast of Snakes* elements of myth and ritual are never far from the surface, and the protagonists are all engaged in a struggle — to the death, in three of the four cases — not with society, with God, or with other men, but with women, terrifying women.

It is appropriate to begin with the mothers in these novels. With only a few exceptions, the mothers in Crews's novels are either exploitative of their children or victims of violence; several, even though dead, continue to exert pressure on

their children. One of the rare sympathetic portrayals is that of the singer's mother in *The Gospel Singer* as a typical rural Georgia countrywoman. She is gently and maternally possessive: she is described several times as a "great warm body," and visiting her "baby" on his first night home, she kneels by his bed and cradles his head in her arms while asking him to "come back home and by my baby again."<sup>7</sup> As a "good" mother, she is warned by her intuition of danger, and at the end of novel, when the mob at the revival charges her son, she reveals the fierceness of her maternal feelings by trying desperately to protect him:

Between him and the mob was a flash of fists and flying hair. It was his mother. There was a livid tear in the flesh of her right arm and on the side of her head a great splash of blood. She fought silently and with incredible fury. There was blood around her mouth, but it was not her blood. She clawed and bit and kicked. . . . (GS, p. 237)

In the same novel Mrs. Carter, MaryBell's mother, is shown in a slightly less sympathetic light. She is first seen sitting by MaryBell's casket impassively killing flies with a "Jesus" fan, and her stony countenance unnerves even the undertaker. While her grief over her daughter's death is heartfelt, she takes every opportunity to link MaryBell and the Gospel Singer so that even in death MaryBell (and she herself, of course) might share the adoration the singer inspires. She has had MaryBell embalmed and has delayed the funeral until his arrival. Prevailing on him to sing to MaryBell's body, she is disappointed when she cannot hear him from outside because of the crowd which has followed him to the funeral home; as she says, "I never heard a word of it, I listened and I never heard nothin. . . . You might as well not even been singin'" (p. 161). But the final pejorative detail of Mrs. Carter's character is seen in her arrangements for MaryBell's funeral. Determined to preserve the image of MaryBell as spotless virgin, despite the Gospel Singer's revelation the night before of her true character, Mrs. Carter has arranged for two white horses and a white wagon as hearse. When the television newsmen question her, she says: "It'd purely make a picture . . . for the television. . . . My MaryBell was struck down and never had a chance for no television nor nothin else. . . . It ain't nothin folks in Enigner would ruther see than MaryBell on the television being pulled by them white horses" (pp. 243-44).

While Mrs. Carter's motives are only partially self-serving, the mothers in a later book, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, are quite obviously exploitative. Mavis, the mother of the brown belt beauty queen Gaye Nell, is herself a former Miss America contestant, having gone so far in her own ambition as to tape up her four-month pregnancy when she realized her "condition" before the pageant. In face, when John Kaimon visits Gaye Nell before the Fourth of July Dania Beach Most Beautiful Girl in the World contest, he realizes that all the contestants' mothers, "splendidly packaged" in beaded or sequined dresses, are former beauty queens continuing their careers through their daughters. After the contest is interrupted before Gaye Nell can be crowned winner, Mavis brings a reporter to the karate enclave, hoping to salvage something, ostensibly for Gaye Nell, but her real need to

fulfill herself through her daughter is revealed when she insists on being included in the pictures and says that she is "getting in shape for the Mrs. America contest."<sup>8</sup>

At least three of the mothers in Crews's novels are victims who suffer a violent death. In *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, John Kaimon's mother, in labor before John's birth, is run over by a chicken truck on the way to the hospital. In *A Feast of Snakes* Joe Lon Mackey's mother, beaten and abused by her husband, runs away with a traveling shoe salesman, only to be brought back by Big Joe. She retaliates by committing suicide, a plastic bag over her head with Big Joe's only tie knotted around her neck, having pinned on her breast a note: "*Bring me back now you son of a bitch.*"<sup>9</sup>

The most horrifying mother is found in *The Gospel Singer*. If the singer's mother is the Good Mother, Didymus's mother is the definitive Evil Mother. A victim of abuse by her husband, she is beaten to death with a razor strop when Didymus is ten. Thus had the child learned that "suffering was the true path to holiness" (GS, p. 75). In the orphanage where he is placed after his father also is killed, Didymus is visited in his dreams by his mother's spirit, which he sees "at the right hand of God," and is coached by her in prayer and self-mutilation. It is she who, appearing "as she always did, kneeling, her hemorrhaging mouth gushing smiles and blood" (GS, p. 78), leads him to the Gospel Singer, whose manager Didymus becomes by murdering Mr. Keene, the singer's former business manager. Didymus's mother had explained the importance of martyrdom to him as well as the idea that evil was not evil if it led to a greater good. Since Didymus's influence over the Gospel Singer's soul was to be a great good, it overbalanced the evil of killing Mr. Keene, at least according to Didymus. Didymus's religious fanaticism is ultimately responsible for the Gospel Singer's revival confession and his lynching by the mob at the conclusion of the novel.

While Didymus's insanity is obviously the result of a trauma too great for a child to bear (and sustained over too long a period), the form which his delusions take is significant; his mother had suffered from masochistic tendencies and delusions of martyrdom which the child internalized. Didymus subconsciously recognizes the threat which she represents to him; as he spends the night at the Gospel Singer's house, he remembers his childhood experiences and his mother while standing at a window looking out at a "huge mastiff bitch." Neumann, in *The Great Mother*, notes that in her form as Hecate, the Great Mother is "the snake-entwined moon goddess of ghosts and the dead. . . . Her principal animal is the dog, the howler by night. . . ."<sup>10</sup> It gives Didymus pleasure to think that if he had gone out she would have ripped him apart, "and the last thing he would have seen in this world would have been those enormous eyes looking into his, her mouth [like his mother's] dripping his blood" (GS, p. 74). As he finishes his thoughts, he sees the dog "grinning" at him:

He got down and knelt on the floor, resting his elbows on the window sill as on an altar. . . . "You want me, don't you, bitch?" he said. "Because you are teeth and I am meat. . . ." A slow moan started in the bitch's throat and rose toward the disappearing moon. "Go on," Didymus cried. "Howl for my

blood, bitch! You'll never have me tonight. You never will!" He had raised his eyes until he too was looking at the place where the moon was drowning in the sky. (*GS*, p. 83)

Mothers are not the only victims in Crews's novels; younger women are also victimized by men, and occasionally they too retaliate. In *A Feast of Snakes* Joe Lon's wife, Elfie, is another martyr-like woman. Joe Lon has blackened her eyes, slammed the oven door on her fingers, and drunkenly raped her while calling her Berenice, the name of his high school sweetheart. Elfie forgives him all, until Joe Lon humiliates her by having sex with Berenice in Elfie's bed while she, the babies, and various others (who know what is going on) stand outside the mobile home. Her mild protest after this occasion helps to drive Joe Lon into a nervous breakdown. In the same novel two other female victims take their revenge, although in very different ways. Lottie Mae, a young black woman, is raped by Buddy Matlow, the sheriff of Mystic, a Vietnam veteran with a wooden leg. After jailing Lottie Mae he forces her to submit to him by turning loose a rattler in her cell. Traumatized by this experience, Lottie Mae sees snakes everywhere, and this is only partially a psychotic reaction in the novel, since an annual snake roundup is taking place and there are in fact snakes everywhere. Another victim in *A Feast of Snakes*, Beeder Mackey, has withdrawn from the world after finding her mother with the plastic bag over her head; she stays in bed watching television, feeling that "she had found a place every bit as good as her mother's" (*FS*, p. 72). It is difficult to tell just how much Beeder really understands; certainly, she doesn't know the specific cause of Lottie Mae's fear. But her own experiences with her father's treatment of her mother, as well as his continuing torture of his fighting dogs, the sound of which she attempts to drown out with the "Wedding Show Game," have taught her the general outlines of Lottie Mae's problem, for at one point she reveals her vision of life: "Everthing is eating everthing else" (*FS*, p. 47). She has developed, at least in fantasy and withdrawal, a means of dealing with it. Beeder advises Lottie Mae either to hide (her solution) or to "kill it"; when Lottie Mae says she couldn't kill it, Beeder says, "Just in case you can, be handy to you razor" (*FS*, p. 71).

Ironically, Lottie Mae *does* kill "it"; when Buddy Matlow attempts to force himself on Lottie Mae again with the aid of a condom designed to look like a snake, she uses the razor which she has kept ready in her shoe to cut off his penis. Here Crews portrays the archetypal male fear, and to his credit, his characterization of the one-legged Buddy, already symbolically castrated, suggests that never was a fate more richly deserved.

On the plot level, adequate motivations and sympathetic reactions toward Beeder and Lottie Mae establish both of them as characters with whom the reader is to empathize, but in subtle and not-so-subtle ways Crews also degrades them. Beeder is revoltingly dirty and smears herself with her own excrement. Although Crews presents Lottie Mae's primitive consciousness fully, her penchant for violence strikes a false note when she watches television with Beeder before she tells the girl that she has killed "the snake." In that passage Crews has the NBC *Nightly*

*News* show the well-known picture from the Vietnam war of a woman kneeling and weeping beside the body of a man, then shaking her fist and screaming at the planes overhead; Crews then asks the reader to believe that Lottie Mae thinks the following:

It was Lottie Mae's favorite program. Much better than the detective stories where you had to put up with a lot of talking and fooling around before you got to the good parts. NBC Nightly News went straight to the robbing and killing, the crying and the blood, burning buildings and mashed cars. Them NBC Nightly News sumbitches was mean. Soon kill you as look at you. Killed somebody every night. (*FS*, p. 131)

Such a description gives Crews an opportunity to widen the context of his story and its concern with violence, as well as to comment ironically about the effect of the news coverage on the uneducated, but he does so by sacrificing the integrity of his character. Intentionally or not, however, the passage does intensify the psychological identification of Lottie Mae with the Terrible Mother, avenging and bloodthirsty.

This identification is reinforced in the final scene of the novel, when Joe Lon's last conscious thought is that two women, Lottie Mae and Beeder, are presiding over his death as at a ritual sacrifice. Covered with rattlers in the snake pit where the enraged hunters have thrown him, Joe Lon "saw, or thought he saw, his sister Beeder in her dirty white nightgown squatting off on the side of the hill with Lottie Mae, watching" (*FS*, p. 177). In fact, this final scene completes what has been a modern presentation of primitive fertility rites, composed of "Boss Snakes" (former high school jocks), ritual slaying and eating of the snakes (at one point, in fact, a crazed group who have just beaten a pet giant anaconda to death slit it open and stand in it), castration, and finally human sacrifice to the goddesses by a crazed mob.

Joe Lon's inarticulate and unhappy consciousness evokes a sympathetic response; he is, in many ways, a southern reprise of Updike's Rabbit: *ubi sunt* the glories of yesteryear's football games and the status of Boss Snake? Nevertheless, what kind of happiness can be possible for a character who regards love as a "scabrous spot of rot" (*FS*, p. 117)? The adolescent mentality surfaces in Joe Lon's attempt to distinguish between the violent relationships of men and those between men and women: "The brutality on the football field, in the tonts, was celebration. Men were maimed without malice, sometimes — often even — in friendship. Lonely, yes. . . . But who in God's name ever assumed otherwise? Once you knew that it was all bearable. But love, love seemed to mess up everything" (*FS*, p. 118).

Like the mothers and the female victims, the young and overtly sexual women in Crews's novels, the temptresses, also have mythic dimensions. Terrible (former) virgins, warrior goddesses, they too reveal that for Crews women have a capacity for wickedness, bloodlust, and violence at least equal to that of men. In *A Feast of Snakes* the three unmarried young women, Candy, her sister Berenice, and

Susan Gender (whose name certainly tips us off about her) are modern versions of Artemis or Athena. They all are or have been majorettes, who parade in front of crowds at the contemporary equivalent of religious festivals, the football game; modern Americans like their goddesses athletic.

The opening description of *A Feast of Snakes* immediately links Candy with the snake goddesses: "She felt the snake between her breasts, felt him there, and loved him there, coiled, the deep tumescent S held rigid, ready to strike. She loved the way the snake looked sewn onto her V-neck letter sweater" (*FS*, p. 3). Berenice is similarly presented when Joe Lon remembers a night during a previous snake roundup when he and Berenice had visited the snake pit. She had stretched out on the dirt in the empty pit and pretended to be covered with snakes: "'They're here. They're filling me here.' She touched her breasts. 'And here.' Her eyes were closed now. Her mouth a little way open. 'A cold bath of snakes,' she said. 'I'm freezing full of snakes. All in my blood. Crawling through my heart'" (*FS*, p. 31). Understandably, Joe Lon is made queasy by her behavior.

While the details of Susan Gender's first appearance are somewhat more subtle, she too is connected with snakes. As her companion, Duffy Deeter, is having sexual intercourse with her — one could not call it making love, especially since Deeter can achieve a climax only when imagining the death camps with "the stunned and naked mothers and their gassed dying children" (*FS*, p. 79) — he thinks that she "was trying to make him look at her. He knew that trick. She'd show him only the deep pink inside her mouth. Make her tongue stand and work like a snake" (*FS*, p. 80). This description might remind us of the depictions of the gorgons, "with snakes for hair and girdle, with their boar's tusks, beards, and outthrust tongues," which Neumann in *The Great Mother* tells us are "uroboric symbols of the primordial power of the archetypal Feminine, images of the great pre-Hellenic Mother Goddess in her devouring aspect. . . ."<sup>1</sup> The connection is reinforced perhaps too strongly when Susan gets up and begins to eat an apple.

Susan Gender, Candy, and Berenice are heartless and malicious. Early in the novel, when Candy and her Boss Snake, Willard, visit Joe Lon's store for some whiskey, she wants to feed live rats to a snake Joe Lon keeps in back, and when Willard and Buddy Matlow exchange verbal insults, she hopes for a fight, "wished she could smell a little blood" (*FS*, p. 25). Later both she and Susan join in the dance-floor torture of a little middle-aged salesman who has unfortunately gone with the group to a roadhouse, and they cooperate in distracting Elfie by putting on a "twirl-off" right outside the mobile home where Joe Lon and Berenice are occupying Elfie's bed (a "love" scene during which Berenice keeps up a running monologue on the art of baton twirling and Joe Long gazes out the window — recurrent behavior of Crews's males on such occasions. Duffy Deeter and, in *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, an unnamed character and John Kaimon are other men who look out the windows of campers or mobile homes during coition. The only other reaction to sex that men reveal in Crews's novels is obliteration of consciousness).

Berenice, Candy, and Susan, however, are not very threatening, at least partially because they never really come to life for the reader; it is difficult to take seriously

as love goddess a character named Hard Candy Sweet. They are empty and vacuous, like Barbie dolls run wild. The men in *A Feast of Snakes* do not really perceive them as threats, but only as convenient sexual objects, although the quality of their sex is characterized as "a battle," as "tearing at each other," or as indistinguishable from the body contact on the football field.

The main female character in *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, however, if almost as wooden, is a much more frightening figure, the incarnation of threatening sexuality. Gaye Nell Odom, beauty queen and karate brown belt, is first seen by the protagonist, John Kaimon, as she beats to a pulp a yellow belt because he dared flick an eye as her nude body paraded in front of the karate group assembled at the beach. She is described as "lethal" and "a weapon," and John later says, "She has six months in the hospital in either fist" (*KTS*, p. 50). After his first "lesson" with her and the *mackawari* board used to strengthen the hand, John has casts on both his hands and is therefore powerless to defend himself when Gaye Nell perpetrates what must be one of the few unambiguous rapes of a male by a female. John spends much of the rest of the novel thinking of how he can get back at her, "not in the manner of the passionless rape, rather, in such a way as to dominate here, to make her breathe when he breathed, to own her" (*KTS*, p. 171). However, he faces a formidable opponent; later at the Dania Beach beauty contest he realizes why she, of all the contestants, is the favorite of the crowd: she has highlighted her deformed knuckles, and "they know she's got crutches, casts and graves in her hands. . . . It was pussy and violence. It was an unimaginable fuck in the same black swimming suit with certain death and mutilation" (*KTS*, p. 183). Gaye Nell, in fact, is a perfect compendium of the Great Mother in her negative aspects, sexually alluring yet deadly, and John Kaimon reveals his newly acquired status as priest of the goddess by shaving his head, a symbolic self-castration found in the primitive cults of the Great Mother.<sup>12</sup>

Neumann points out that the primitive fertility goddess was always seen as both mother and virgin, in the sense that she was not dependent on any one man.<sup>13</sup> When Gaye Nell announces that she is pregnant, six days after her sexual assault on John, we may see this as another element meant to characterize her as a goddess; it certainly fulfills the *mother* part of the archetype and, considering the normal biological demands for conception, is the next best thing to a miracle. On the plot level, however, Gaye Nell is a most reluctant potential mother. She continues her daily routine of allowing the leader of the karateka to kick her stomach, and on the occasions when she and John have sexual intercourse she encourages him to be violent in hopes of causing a miscarriage. He, on the other hand, thinks of the fetus as "*his own life under assault*" (*KTS*, p. 171), "the image of himself the size of a dime hanging for his life inside there in the wet and dangerous lining of her" (*KTS*, p. 186).

Another aspect of this novel which reveals the guiding presence of the Great Mother archetype in very early form is the inclusion of homosexuals, a rarity in Crews's novels. In religion the use of women's clothing indicates identification with the Great Mother and is a symbolic sacrifice of masculinity; Neumann points out that modern priestly garb is a remnant of the primitive practice, as well as

citing the male prostitutes found in various religious cults.<sup>14</sup> In *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* John has a number of encounters with Marvin and George, whose performance as female dancers in a gay nightclub is so convincing that they lure John into their dressing room where, since his hands are in those plaster casts, they sodomize him. In the same nightclub he is astounded to encounter in the men's room a "beautiful girl" with "one of the biggest peters" he has ever seen; he learns later that "she" is a professional football player who goes in drag in the off-season. This "woman with a phallus" may be linked also to worship of the Great Mother; Neumann explains that in the infantile consciousness the goddess is worshiped in androgynous form.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting that in this novel, the protagonist's masculine force eventually triumphs both with Gaye Nell, who rides off into the sunset with John at the end of the novel, and with the homosexuals, who survive a "teaching" session with John after his hands have healed and who return as converts to karate. The book blatantly celebrates physical force, and it may be that only because both John and Gaye Nell embody that force can Crews give his book a (dubious) happy ending. In *The Gypsy's Curse* the protagonist also manages to survive a destructive woman but at the cost of almost everything meaningful to him. In *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes* the protagonists' deaths signal the victory of the all-devouring Terrible Mother, their surrender to the unconscious.

Perhaps one of the most horrifying of all Crews's women is MaryBell Carter in *The Gospel Singer*. She is the Virgin Goddess, worshiped lustfully by every man in Enigma, Georgia; when she was "saved" by the Gospel Singer, it caused "every man [in the church] to sin instantaneously by lusting after the flesh of the convert while he sat in God's House watching the miracle of salvation" (GS, p. 95). But while MaryBell remains the pure maiden for the townspeople, the Gospel Singer, whose vocation has given him many opportunities for seduction, methodically debauches her, teaching her prostitutes' tricks and dirty words, which, he says, "she had always somehow known but had never said" (GS, p. 148). Unfortunately, the resultant Dark Lady takes control; she becomes sexually voracious and foul-mouthed. Like Nately's whore in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, MaryBell, usually naked, leaps out on the Gospel Singer from trees, the back seat of his Cadillac, under his bed. Believing she has a right to him and wanting marriage, she is "at his back like the wrath of God," making his life a "living Hell." The Gospel Singer has no intention of marrying anyone, of course, and so she puts a curse of sorts on him: "'You gone remember me,' she said. 'I promise you that. The last thought you ever gone have on this earth'll be between my legs.'" (GS, p. 154). While the Gospel Singer has in mind a last-minute plea for forgiveness for a long life of good food, cars, and women, in actuality his last words are a curse on the townspeople, MaryBell's devotees, and an ironic fulfillment of her prophecy.

While the people of Enigma see MaryBell as the doer of good works among the Negroes in the "Quarter," the Gospel Singer hears her say that "with you gone they ain't nothin here for me. I ain't sayin I'm gone do it but I know they ain't but one place for a white girl to screw and keep her reputation, and that's in Quarter" (GS, pp. 159-60). The Gospel Singer is horrified to learn from MaryBell's



killer, Willalee, that she has encouraged the blacks to build a church to him as a savior; he has regarded his talent as the opportunity for luxury and sex and superstitiously denies his power to save or heal. While the town assumes that Willalee has also raped MaryBell before killing her, he tells the Gospel Singer that actually MaryBell had revealed to him the singer's gross sensuality, and in anger at her "lies" Willalee had stabbed her sixty-one times.

MaryBell's hatred and malice lead to her own destruction, to that of Willalee, and ultimately to that of the Gospel Singer. When Didymus forces him to speak at the revival, the Singer tells the truth about himself and MaryBell: "I cain't do nothing but sing gospel songs and lay your women, your wives and mothers and daughters — *all your MaryBells*" (GS, p. 236; Crews's italics). But, as the Gospel Singer knows, the people don't want the truth, and in retaliation "Enigma moves as one man" (GS, p. 236) to hang him next to Willalee. The next day MaryBell is given a virgin's funeral, a goddess vindicated and placated by blood sacrifice. One might say of MaryBell what Leslie Fiedler says about Faye Greener of Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*: "She is the dream dreamed by all of America, the dream of a love which is death; and in a strange sense she remains virginal as death is virginal: the immaculate, degraded *anima* of a nation. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

The clearest presentation of Crews's masculine ethos and of the danger to it that woman represent occurs in *The Gypsy's Curse*, perhaps his most carefully wrought novel. In this story, unlike *A Feast of Snakes* and *The Gospel Singer*, the two sides seem equally balanced. The male bonding of the "family" at the Fireman's Gym — Marvin, the deaf-mute legless protagonist; Al, his adoptive father; Leroy, the punch-drunk boxer; and Pete, the senile ex-trainer — is communicated, paradoxically, through Crews's insistence on the inability of spoken language and the efficacy of "body" language (among men only) to deal adequately with the emotions. As in Crews's other novels, physical love between a man and a woman is seen as finally destructive.

The contented male community of the Fireman's Gym is shattered when Marvin's girlfriend Hester (whose name identifies her immediately with America's most famous Dark Lady) moves in. She plays the men off against each other, to the ironic refrain of Pete's coaching, "Wake [work] to the body, Wake to the body,"<sup>17</sup> which is, of course, the problem. The men *do* "wake" to Hester's body, a fine, muscular one that she does not hesitate to display. Within two weeks Hester has them at each other's throats: Al has struck Leroy; Marvin has broken Leroy's arm; Leroy and Pete are involved in sparring matches in which Leroy beats Pete even more senseless; and Al continually accuses Marvin of hating them all. The physically normal daughter of deaf-mute parents, Hester is restless, cruel, and destructive. We learn that she has at least once locked her parents in a room for a week; she tortures Marvin with her affair with a Greek fisherman; and she goads Al into repeating a disastrous automobile stunt which earlier has injured his head and this time fatally crushes his chest.

Only Pete seems relatively immune to Hester's spell, and he tries to warn Marvin: "It be a lot of ways to die in the world, and the worse way of all is for a woman. It ain't been a man walked on God's earth couldn't die for a woman. All of us

could. Some of us did. But it be a cheap way to go" (GC, p. 142). Yet even though Marvin realizes that Hester is going to destroy Al, he is powerless to act; he is under the gypsy's curse, "*Que encuentres un cono a tu medida.*" This curse, it might be noted, is phrased in such a way as to reduce the body to one part; it is not "a woman" to be met but only "*un cono*" — love as itch. Thus, the effect of Hester on Marvin is to blot out consciousness or rationality; that is, she represents the temptation seen in Crews's other novels to sink back into that preconscious uroboric unity with the maternal, whether it is represented by a young or an old woman. Marvin's attacks on Leroy and Aristotle, the Greek fisherman, stemming from sexual jealousy, seem to occur when he is in an unconscious state, and when he finally sees that Hester means to destroy them all, he can only say, "Everything went out of my head. Nothing mattered at all except where she was losing me. And I was being lost, I really was, if you can understand that" (GC, p. 194).

Marvin also gets "lost" in the pain of his workouts, but in the sweaty comradeship of the gym, the effects of this loss are positive: Al loves his son, and Marvin feels a part of a community. A stronger intuitive bond among the men is forged; their "body" language here does not obliterate the body but instead affirms and celebrates it.

What saves Hester from the pasteboard quality of Gaye Nell, Berenice, and Candy Sweet, and, to a lesser extent, MaryBell, is Crews's greater attention to her motivation and to her insight into herself. Yet, like almost all the rest of Crews's women, she seems to lack purpose or meaning on her own terms, a textbook illustration of a comment by Lionel Trilling: "Women in fiction only rarely have the peculiar reality of the moral life that self-love bestows. Most commonly they exist in a moon-like way, shining by the reflected moral life of men. . . . They seldom exist as men exist — as genuine moral destinies."<sup>18</sup>

Her father tells Marvin, in extenuation of Hester's cruelty, that his daughter is often bored, and Hester's highest praise is that something is "interesting." In the light of what Hester does to those around her, this search for entertainment is chilling, but toward the end of the book Crews supplies Hester with a speech which, if it does not mitigate her responsibility for the destruction she brings about, at least supplies a human motivation — self-defense — for her actions. She has begun to feel real affection for Marvin as he, like John Kaimon in *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, has asserted his strength, and she tries to explain herself to him:

Things get . . . so dead. Everything just dies and then I have to do something. . . . All I'm trying to do is stay alive. When everything starts to die, I get this dreadful loneliness. No, not lonely. Alone. Like I was the only one in the world. Like everything else is a desert. People dry up and die. Food's got no taste. Color goes out of the trees, out of everything. Tomorrow won't ever come. Yesterday isn't worth remembering. Or if you can remember it you wonder how you lived through it. . . . That's when I . . . well, when I have to change things. I just have to. What I *want* to do has nothing to do with it. I have to turn things around, and then it's all interesting again. (GC, pp. 179-80).

Later, after Hester has goaded Marvin into axing her to death, her diary is offered by her father to Marvin's lawyer for use in Marvin's defense; in the diary Hester had written, "Someday I'll find somebody who loves me enough to kill me. And someday I'll find somebody I admire enough to make him do it" (*GC*, p. 208).

It is fitting that, at the end of *The Gypsy's Curse*, Marvin is on his way to Raiford Prison. It is not likely to be a coed institution. If he has lost Al and Leroy and Pete, still he can look forward to the gym at the prison, where there is the possibility of establishing safe communication with men. When love is conceived of only as a state of sexual obsession, it is a curse, and Marvin is imprisoned in a truncated body language which is nevertheless and tragically the best means of communication he can hope for.

And what about Crews himself? One would like to believe that he comprehends the flaws in his protagonists' relationships with women and sees that their immaturity is a direct cause of the destructive nature of these relationships. One would like to think that Crews assigns responsibility for this immaturity to the culture from which his characters proceed. But the absence in his novels of women who are whole human beings, people with centers of personality; the preponderance of female figures presented as either victim or attacker (or sexual object); the reluctance to enter the consciousness of a female character (Lottie Mae, a black victim, is the notable exception here); and the admiration and reverence with which Crews's many athletic protagonists are described — all militate against such a judgment.

Crews has many talents, among them a compelling narrative flow, marvelous and touching black and country characters, and a quick eye for the absurdities of modern Southern American life. I believe, however, that his novels have a major weakness, a profoundly damaging one: his women are not real human beings but mythological figures in modern (and degraded) dress. This denial of humanity to women, and, in the words of Carolyn Heilbrun in her essay "The Masculine Wilderness of the American Novel," by extension, to the feminine impulses in all human beings, ". . . lock[s] us still more firmly not only into our prisons of gender but also into a world that is now fatally dominated by the male-fantasy ideal."<sup>19</sup> Given this flaw, Crews's novels seem to me only partially successful. D.H. Lawrence, that early, perceptive critic of American literature, still offers what would seem to be good advice to Crews and to his fellow contemporary American novelists: "Unless a man believes in himself and his gods, *genuinely*: Unless he fiercely obeys his own Holy Ghost, his woman will destroy him. Woman is the nemesis of doubting man."<sup>20</sup>

## 9. Theme and Technique in Harry Crews's *Car*

Frank W. Shelton

In a 1978 interview Harry Crews was asked about his books not selling well. He responded, "I feel bad about that. Because anybody that tells me he doesn't lust for an audience, I think he's crazy."<sup>1</sup> In the past Crews has been neglected by book buyers and critics alike, but at present his reputation seems in a transitional state. Though his autobiography, *A Childhood*, was very well received, his novels, on which his reputation will finally rest, have been neglected, with only one of them currently in print. While he is beginning to receive some critical attention, published interviews with him still outnumber articles considering his fiction.<sup>2</sup> The fact that he has been frequently interviewed signals interest in him as a literary figure, but perhaps the dearth of essays suggests that critics are presently feeling their way toward an appropriate response to his work. He is certainly a true original, though the quality of his works is quite uneven. The purpose of this essay is to consider one of his better novels, *Car* (1972), using it to identify his primary concerns and to discuss his artistic methods and techniques.

*Car* is almost pure Crews. He has always said he considers himself a traditional storyteller, and certainly this novel, like all his others, has a hard, pure story line. His briefest novel, it is perhaps not his absolute best because its very shortness and single-mindedness prevent complexity of character development in all but a couple of instances. However, for this very reason it is an intense and a revealing novel to examine in terms of technique. Crews's work fits generally into the tradition of the Southern grotesque, in which aberrations of character and action mirror the distortions of mental life in the modern age. A close relationship exists between the world as we know it and the world of Crews's fiction. He has explained,

I like to start with something that is obviously a world that nobody can quarrel with. Here is the porch and there is the chair and here is the man and we're all happy, right? Then in a very slow kind of left-handed way, left-handed in the sense that you don't call attention to it, it just slides off the edge of the real world into a thing that can't possibly be true. Except it is true; at least, I think it is.<sup>3</sup>

*Car* is set in a recognizably contemporary Jacksonville, Florida, and centers around an automobile junkyard (with the sanitizing name "Auto-Town"). Yet through his stripped description of setting and through his simplification of character description so that characters become defined almost entirely by their obsessions, Crews distorts the recognizable to show a reality beneath the surface.

The novel concerns the determination of Herman Mack to eat a Ford Maverick out of love for automobiles. Immediately the reader recognizes the literal absurdity of this action, but Crews's method is to treat it literally and to push it to its logical conclusion, evoking both laughter and terror in the reader. Such a conjunction of disparate feelings is Crews's trademark. For example, he works out a scheme whereby Herman is to eat one-half pound of the car every evening and pass that same amount each following morning. The rough edges of the pieces are to be smoothed, and that which cannot be easily swallowed is to be encapsulated. Crews concentrates on Herman's physical and spiritual sensations during this process. Finally, to pursue the situation to its logical conclusion, the characters calculate that it will take Herman "only" ten years to consume the entire automobile. The plot premise itself is absurd and unbelievable, but by developing it so matter-of-factly Crews causes the reader to accept it and in a weird way to identify with, perhaps even to admire Herman, making for a strange yet compelling reading experience.

From the foregoing it is clear that the novel's theme is an unexceptional one — the national love affair with the automobile and with the open road, with further evocation of the freedom which Americans have long associated with the automobile. Crews has recently called the automobile an "abomination before the Lord,"<sup>4</sup> and the novel clearly expresses that same feeling. In fact, Crews seems to devalue this novel, feeling that its theme is "rather obvious. *Car* would have been a better book if I had not been so outraged over the subject."<sup>5</sup> Yet, though the subject of the novel is not original, the treatment of that subject surely is, and Crews's treatment of it is one of my interests here. (With the recent oil crisis and the national obsession with it, Crews's novel may strike more responsive chords now than when it was first published. A person caught in a long gas line or paying wildly inflated prices for gasoline may, indeed, feel he is being forced to consume his automobile and all that goes with it.)

In conjunction with the novel's concern with the automobile, one can identify several additional themes which are characteristic of Crews's other novels and of much contemporary fiction. Again, it is often the treatment of these themes which makes Crews's novels original. Crews has said frequently that his fiction, in fact any fiction, concerns "a guy doing the best he can with what he's got."<sup>6</sup> Since what man has in this novel is the machine, *Car* explores man's relationship with technology and, more generally, what it means to be a human being. Although not a conventional Southern family epic, the novel also treats the role of the family and the individual's place in it, virtually all the main characters being Mack family members. The family here, as elsewhere in Crews, is not a sustaining institution; as a result, the isolated characters are desperately seeking a sense of belonging and of humanity in a landscape dominated by automobiles.

Crews has indicated that awareness of place is fundamental to any piece of writing he has done,<sup>7</sup> so a consideration of his depiction of Jacksonville is revealing. Like *Naked in Garden Hills* and other Crews novels, *Car* is set in the modern South, dominated by automobiles and superhighways. Auto-Town is forty-three acres of wrecked cars. Next to it is the roiling excremental flow of the Saint John's River. "Ten feet of gasoline on top of fifty feet of shit. . . . Being this close to the Saint John's River was like being too close to the open door of a furnace. An airy blast of gas and chemicals and stopped-up toilets rushed about his head."<sup>8</sup> Nature seems to have disappeared from this debased and polluted world. People do not even come into contact with the earth, for when they walk at all, they walk either on concrete or, at Auto-Town, on "an unknowably thick layer of glass shards, glass of all colors, rose, yellow, clear, tinted blue and pink, and even black. Mixed with the glass were ragged slivers of aluminum, scarred lumps of cast iron, and other pieces of metal worn down fine as sand" (C, pp. 4-5). When asked by his father why he has not considered eating, for example, a tree instead of a car, Herman replies, directing his father's attention to the overflowing streets, "You don't see a tree down there. . . . Not a one. Your car is where it's at" (C, p. 28). Nature seems to have been decimated or transformed by modern technology. In one of the finest descriptive passages in the novel, Crews tells of the opening of an expressway that soars seventy feet over Auto-Town. An out-of-control truck completely destroys the autocade returning from the ribbon-cutting ceremony, and, since they cannot be salvaged, the wrecked cars are pushed over the side of the expressway "where they fell some seven stories down from the expressway into East Mack's Auto-Town. . . . Herman and Mister were standing down in the yard watching cars fall from the sky" (C, p. 48). In the world of this novel it does not rain even cats and dogs; it rains cars. These examples of Crews's description of place demonstrate exactly how he takes a recognizable setting — a city dominated by the automobile and by pollution — and, through the use of imagery, forces the setting "off the edge of the real world" while it yet seems to remain real. Living in such a setting and having to work out some kind of relationship with the all-encompassing machine, the characters in the novel quite understandably become warped by obsession.

The character around whose obsession the book is constructed is Herman Mack, from childhood a gentle, sensitive boy, an idealist and dreamer who felt himself special, "saved to do some fantastic and special things that would set him apart from other men" (C, p. 47). Because he was raised at Auto-Town, his horizon was limited by the automobile and his aspirations all center around the automobile. His first venture was "CAR DISPLAY: YOUR HISTORY ON PARADE," in which Herman includes models of cars from the last fifty years. Herman knows that "everything that's happened in this goddam country in the last fifty years has happened in, on, around, with, or near a car. And everybody wants to return to the scene of the crime" (C, pp. 12-13). The enterprise is tremendously successful. People have a need to revisit the past in order to compensate for the emptiness of the present, and the visitors range from a widow who wants to see the car in which her husband was accidentally killed to a couple who want to see the car in which

their son, recently killed in Vietnam, was conceived. Herman, instinctively sensing that Americans view their history in terms of cars, knows that their vague sense of longing to belong can only be assuaged by some fleeting contact with the automobiles in which the crucial events of their lives occurred. Although Herman is fulfilled by the service he is providing, his father, tremendously oppressed by the sadness, loneliness, and lovelessness in the lives of the people who visit the display, forces Herman to close it down. Herman then decides to eat a car.

Herman's motives are complex. On the one hand, his desire is religious in nature — Crews has declared elsewhere that "we have found God in cars,"<sup>9</sup> and Herman actually wants to experience communion with the deity he loves. But at the same time that he reveres the car, he also resents its domination over him; thus, he says, "I refuse to have my life measured out in cars" (C, p. 49). He wants to exert power and control over that which he feels threatens to control him. In a sense, he is half-saint and half-infidel.

The reactions to Herman of those around him provide one focus of interest in the novel. His twin brother, Mister, first feels only contempt for him because, being practical and down-to-earth, Mister cannot understand Herman's motives and considers him unnatural. However, when Mister discovers that large amounts of money can be made by marketing Herman, he becomes one of his brother's strongest supporters.

Mister is a very simple, flat character, defined almost solely by his hunger for money and the material things it will bring. Easy, the boys' father, on the other hand, is more complex. A representative of the novel's older generation, he too has loved cars, but he seems able to integrate his work on them into a broader concept of life. He began his career as the best shadetree mechanic in Lebeau County, Georgia. His roots are thus in the land, in a more rural area than Jacksonville, and he feels some sense of traditional values the other characters lack, even though his life has come to be dominated by cars. He has opened Auto-Town in 1939: "It was a junkyard. But he called it Auto-Town. It gave a little class. It honored. He was determined always to honor the thing he loved" (C, p. 15). He drives an International-Harvester which he has "literally built . . . with his own hands for reasons of love. He has incorporated into the vehicle parts of cars not because they were the highest performance parts that could be found but because they were parts that held special memories and associations for him" (C, p. 17). He has found a way to humanize the automobile and to maintain some balance in his life. It is important to him that his children love cars; however, the form Herman's love takes unbalances Easy's life. Not only is he sensitive to the desperation, the lack of joy and love in the people who visit the car display, he is absolutely devastated by Herman's determination to eat a car. To him Herman has become perverted, freakish, less than human. "In a slow horror Easy realized that Herman liked it, liked the bumper-to-bumper cars there below, liked the nose-burning, eyewatering emissions from hundreds of smoky tailpipes. It was like finding out that your son liked to hang around public restrooms smelling the toilets, or that he was secretly eating shit" (C, pp. 28-29). In a sense, Herman's attitude is simply an extension of Easy's; perhaps he has simply learned his father's

lesson too well. But at the same time Easy has retained a conception of what it is human to feel and do, a conception he believes Herman lacks.

Easy's attitude is further developed when Mister, as would be natural, buys for the family with the first proceeds of Herman's activity a Cadillac, "the standard of excellence that everything's measured against" (C, p. 85). Yet Easy, who has heretofore always accepted this slogan, does not respond to the purchase as expected. Seeing the Cadillac, he feels only nausea, the same nausea he feels when he sees the first piece of a Ford being cut for Herman to eat. Appalled by the Cadillac's power and luxury, he can only wonder what it would be like if one had to eat a car that huge. Easy does not become revitalized until he hears a squeak in the Cadillac, a squeak that everyone else denies, because it would mar the car's perfection. But Easy, nauseated by the car, responds positively to its squeak; he identifies it with his life, or at least with his sanity and his humanity. He thinks that what "a squeak in a car required was a *man*. A man who was a mechanic. A man who controlled and understood the car. Understood its weaknesses. Its flaws" (C, p. 103). Though intimidated by the mechanical complexity of the automobile, Easy is determined to fix it. "Either you mastered it or it mastered you. In a blind awful moment of perverse non-reasoning, he knew that if he couldn't fix it, he ought to have to eat it" (C, pp. 103-4). From this point in the novel he becomes as obsessed as Herman with trying to combat the domination of the mechanical and the nonhuman. In his case honor and love turn into pure desperation.

In Herman's sister, Junell, Crews includes a character who sees nothing at all wrong with being identified with the machine. Dressed in black motorcycle leathers, she drives Big Mama, an eight-ton wrecker (which she insists be called a tow truck) to accidents on the expressway. She and other drivers compete to see who can arrive at accidents first and get the pick of the smashed cars. "They sometimes had awful accidents in their efforts to arrive first on the scene . . ." (C, p. 34). In the one scene devoted to an accident, Crews's method, with its conjunction of the ridiculous and the terrible, can be observed in pure form. Though Junell meets her boyfriend, a highway patrolman, only at such accidents, they still meet four or five times a week. He courts her in the back seat of his souped-up Chrysler Cruiser by describing in seductive detail all its many special automotive features. The infantile nature of their relationship is hilariously clear. His first step is always to say that he loves and respects her. Then, "with the amenities out of the way, he was content to lie between her breasts — now and then taking a long pull at one of them as though drinking from a stream — and tell her about his car" (C, p. 41). At the same time that this is occurring, however, other workers are attempting to cut a family from the wrecked auto Junell has claimed for herself, and Crews describes in graphic and gruesome detail the father, mother, and brother, all dead; the only living member of the family, a six-year-old girl, is called simply "a lump of blood that screamed" (C, p. 43). As the ambulance with the girl roars down the road, one of the ambulance attendants sits in the back beside the girl giving *himself* oxygen for his hangover. Much further in dehumanization it would be impossible to go. This juxtaposition of comedy and horror is characteristic of



Crews; here the juxtaposition measures how horrified Crews is by the brutality of the events and the insensitivity of the people in the narrative.

The relationship between Junell and Joe, her boyfriend, reaches a crisis when he is assigned as a guard to the hotel where Herman and his family are staying and where Herman will eat the Fort Maverick. The Chrysler is taken from Joe, and without it and the accidents his relationship with Junell seems to lack direction. But she has the inspiration that they should start meeting in the back seat of Herman's Maverick. These meetings move their relationship to a more serious stage; as they excitedly describe to one another how Herman will eat every part of the car, they have sex for the first time. As he had earlier connected the automobile with violence, Crews here connects it with sex, and he does so in a manner reminiscent of the e.e. cummings poem "she being Brand." The connection is, of course, familiar to anyone who has paid attention to advertisements for new automobiles.

After having initially negative feelings about Herman's activity, two members of his family, Mister and Junell, become his enthusiastic supporters. Mister, of course, sees only the money to be made from exploiting the spectacle, and the relationship of Junell and Joe becomes absolutely dependent on Herman. After their first night in the Maverick, they consider themselves engaged and plan to marry immediately after Herman completes his consumption of the car. Although they will have to wait ten years, it does not matter to them, their relationship now has a goal and a direction.

*Car* also reflects a theme present in almost all Crews's other novels: show business and the dynamics of crowd reaction. Much of the humor of the novel comes through the depiction of how Herman's basically religious act is exploited for profit. ABC's "Wide World of Sports" is interested in a television film of the highlights of the event, and it is being broadcast to Japan via satellite. Mr. Edge, the hotel owner in charge of marketing the event, protests to cynical and irreverent newspaper reporters that all is being done with class and taste. As a characteristic example of Mr. Edge's notion of class and taste, the first piece of the Maverick that Herman eats and excretes is auctioned publicly to the highest bidder for \$8,233 and is then melted down into a miniature replica of the car. Future pieces cost a more reasonable \$12.50. Tickets are sold both to the eating and the passing, though the passing, for obvious reasons, seems the more fascinating event. Crowds are a constant in Crews's work, and, while the crowd here is not as ugly or as violent as in other of his novels, this one does have an unhealthy fascination with Herman. Even though he is acting out, as a surrogate, the crowd's love of the automobile, they want at least in part to see him fail, as becomes clear when Mister, who is forced to take Herman's place, starts hemorrhaging after eating the first piece. Ultimately, this crowd, like the others in Crews's novels, wants to see blood.

Mister must take Herman's place because Herman cannot finally carry through his eating of the car. Just as his reasons for beginning the activity were complex, so are his reasons for stopping. On the one hand, after he has eaten the front bumper and part of the hood, the physical pain becomes simply too intense to bear. He

explains, "I love that Maverick car. And I think because I love it so much, I can't stand for it to cause that kind of pain in me" (C, p. 135). But, on the other hand, at the same time that he still loves the car, he has other perhaps unconscious feelings about it as well, as a dream he has shortly after he begins eating it suggests. He dreams that he is filled with cars, so filled that he finally becomes a car. Even though he sees this as a promise of his own "immortality" (C, p. 74), the dream also represents the essence of dehumanization, and, if Herman does not want to be measured by automobiles, he certainly does not want to become one, either. By abandoning his attempt to eat the car, Herman finally asserts the difference between his humanity and the machine, and he also asserts the superiority of his own humanity.

While Mister and Junell, because the direction of their lives has become so intimately linked with Herman's consumption of the automobile, are determined that the spectacle continue, Herman and Easy, the more sympathetic characters, withdraw from the central action of the novel at this point. In their withdrawal Crews suggests the different routes man can take in resisting modern mechanization. Herman has come to have a close though chaste relationship with Margo, the hotel prostitute with the stereotypic heart of gold. She is in sympathy with his desire to eat the car, but she also seems to understand or at least to accept his motive for stopping. When Herman decides there is nothing he can do to help Mister, Herman and Margo leave, in effect going off into the sunset believing that they will find a better life together than either found separately. Love seems to conquer all, and in its sentimental conclusion *Car* is characteristic of this period of Crews's writing. Yet the ending is not as simple as it seems. The novel concludes with Herman showing Margo his secret place, sacred to him since childhood — a Rolls-Royce buried in the exact center of a tremendous mound of cars at Auto-Town. Thus, while implying that the couple will live happily ever after, Crews leaves them still buried under the weight of the machine. The reader must accept on faith that Herman has conquered his obsession and earned his freedom.

Further qualifying the optimism of the novel's ending is Easy's fate. The repository of traditional values, he finally cannot cope any longer with the modern world. Unable to watch Herman eat the car, he has been living like a hermit at Auto-Town. But the final blow to him is Mister's presumed death because he has been unable to substitute for Herman. When Mister starts bleeding, Easy can only kiss him and tell him repeatedly that he has finally fixed the squeak in the Cadillac. Yet Easy knows that his former ideal of control is irrelevant now. In the novel's closing scene, juxtaposed to Herman and Margo's peace in the Rolls-Royce, comes the sound of the car crusher, presumably with Easy in it, a suicide. At the conclusion of the novel, then, Crews yokes love and death, modifying the otherwise positive ending.

*Car* suggests that the individual who wants to remain human cannot integrate himself either in his own family or in the larger family of society. For Crews shows through various techniques that society and most people are dominated by technology and the vulgarities and greed of show business. A sense of humanity comes only through love, and in order to experience that love the characters must detach

themselves from their surroundings. In later novels the obsessions of Crews's characters become more dominant, and the hope of integration, either within the individual personality or on an interpersonal level, becomes much weaker. But at this point in his career, about midpoint in terms of the number of published novels, Crews balances pessimism with regard to the social forces impinging on the individual and at least a qualified optimism in terms of the individual's ability to find meaning in a relationship with another person.

## 10. The Other End of Love: Harry Crews's *Car*

Larry Vonalt

If there is one machine in twentieth-century America dear to our hearts, it is the automobile. We love it because of its powers of transformation. We know the car can take us even further than it takes itself. It takes us beyond ourselves. Behind the wheel and on the highway we become A. J. Foyt or Janet Guthrie, and behind the wheel and at the drive-in movie we are Robert Redford or Jane Fonda. Because it seems to have such magical powers, some of us have made the car not just a symbol of our salvation from a world that creeps in its petty pace but our Savior, who almost instantaneously, in the turn of a key, transports us out of the Hell of ourselves and into the Heaven of our dreamed true selves.

Flannery O'Connor expresses some of the supernatural powers we give the car when, in *Wise Blood*, she has Hazel Motes assert, "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified." In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" she has Mr. Shiftlet claim, "The spirit is like an automobile, always on the move . . .," and "A man's spirit means more to him than anything else."<sup>1</sup> Although O'Connor only briefly suggests the car's powerful pull on our psyches, Harry Crews, writing in the decade after O'Connor, thoroughly explores in his short novel *Car* the anatomy of our love for the machine we call car and believe is God.

Three years after the publication of the novel, Crews published an essay in which he demonstrates that even he had not "managed to remain aloof from the national love affair with cars." In this essay Crews also explicitly states the subject of his novel. "We have found God in cars," he writes, "or if not the true God, one so satisfying, so powerful and awe-inspiring that the distinction is too fine to matter. Except perhaps ultimately. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Crews is concerned about that fine distinction, and, in the process of revealing that crucial difference, he depicts some of the more powerful forces of this machine-god. He shows the car's power as an emblem of status, the measurer of men, and he suggests that the car's sexual attraction may be more actual than symbolic. But what Crews does, above all else, is take this love for the car to an extreme, to theophagy, the worship of God by eating God. In so doing he unmask the other end of such love — the emptiness and

worthlessness that man finds in worshipping himself as God, for Crews, like Claes Oldenburg,<sup>3</sup> sees the car as a double man has made of himself.

*Car* focuses on the family of Easton "Easy" Mack, the owner of a forty-three acre junkyard for cars on the outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida. Easy, who "had started working on Fords almost as soon as Ford started working on them . . . had always loved" cars.<sup>4</sup> Cars, he believed, "would save them all" (C, p. 79), and the car had been good to him and his. He had begun as a shadetree mechanic and worked his way finally to owning the junkyard he named, out of honor and love, Auto-Town. This blessing he shares with his children: his daughter Junell, who drives the tow truck "Big Mama," and retrieves cars totaled in wrecks, and his sons, Mister, the operator of the car crusher that metamorphoses the junked cars into suitcase-size pieces of metal, and Mister's twin, Herman, a dreamer whose "dreams never seemed to amount to much" (C, p. 10).

One of Herman's dreams that amounts to something is "CAR DISPLAY: YOUR HISTORY ON PARADE." This dream comes to Herman in the form of a man who appears one day at Auto-Town looking for a 1949 DeSoto. The man has lost his son in Vietnam and now wants to see the car in which his son had been conceived. Right away Herman realizes that, as he says, "everything that's happened in this goddam country in the last fifty years has happened in, on, around, with, or near a car. And everybody wants to return to the scene of the crime" (C, pp. 11-12). That Herman sees the car as a scene of a crime suggests the common notion that the car is a secret place set apart for the special and meaningful activities of our lives.

To create CAR DISPLAY Herman gathers the "rusted, broken, and mutilated" bodies of different model cars, places them in rows, and puts up a billboard that reads "SEE THE CAR IT HAPPENED IN — THE EVENT THAT CHANGED YOUR LIFE." The people come, thousands of them, to relive their pasts, to be once again what they no longer are. But the reliving of such powerful emotions is too much for some of them to bear; it unbalances: "A man stabbed his brother-in-law over the hood of a forty-seven Ford. A woman lost her sanity when her husband opened the door of a forty Studebaker and said, 'See.'" Easy Mack can't stand what he sees and makes his son stop CAR DISPLAY, because, he says, "there is no joy. No love" in people feeding off the dead past. His father's refusal to allow CAR DISPLAY to continue triggers in Herman a more audacious dream and the novel's central action. Herman declares he will eat, "from bumper to bumper," a brand-new 1974 Ford Maverick.

The promoter of Herman's act is Homer Edge, the owner of the Sherman Hotel in Jacksonville. A good American businessman, Edge is a man of faith — faith in Herman, in the American public, and in himself. Certain that Herman's dream will be a huge success, Edge is willing to sacrifice much to gain great returns. He builds a special "platform in front of the Sherman Hotel behind a sheet of clear bullet-proof plastic" to hold the Maverick and Herman until Herman actually begins to eat the car. He gets ABC Television to sign a contract to film the show for "Wide World of Sports," and withstands the threat of a court injunction from Ford Motor Company, which claims Herman's eating the car "would ruin the image of the car

in the minds of the American people" (C, p. 62). He even brings Herman's family into the act, making Mister a partner and Junell and her boyfriend Joe, a special state trooper, part of the show. When Herman is ready to perform, Edge remodels the front of his hotel to bring the Maverick into the ballroom, the amphitheater of Herman's act. What for Herman is an act of love, Edge has transformed into a theatrical entertainment, a sporting event, an ad man's dream.

If Homer Edge transforms what is potentially a religious act into show business, he is not the only one interested in substantial change. Herman wants, in part, to eat the car because he believes that the act will give his life purpose, will make him somebody. Mister also wants to be somebody. He wants to be, as he says, "*rich*. Home free at last" (C, p. 80), a real American businessman. After Herman begins eating the car, Mister buys a brand-new, solid white Sedan De Ville Cadillac as a testament of his newfound self. It is only fitting for a man of his new stature to own such a car, because the Cadillac is, to Mister's mind, "the standard of excellence that everything's measured against" (C, p. 85).

Mister's belief that the car, not God, is the measurer of all things is not unusual for someone whose whole life has been the car. Raised at Auto-Town amid acres of junked cars and by a father who loves the machine, Mister knows no other way; he doesn't care if the car measures him, just as long as it makes him rich. On the other hand, Herman, who has had the same upbringing as Mister, feels differently, and Crews depicts this difference between the twins in a fantastic scene about their early lives. Ten minutes after the state has opened a new expressway that "soared" over Auto-Town, a truck smashes through the concrete divider and into the whole autocade of officials from the ribbon-cutting ceremonies. To clear the road of the wreckage, the work crews simply take off the guard rails and push the wrecks into Auto-Town, seventy feet below. Mister's response to this manna from heaven is "Hot damn, . . . that's making money," while Herman says, "God, . . . it's scary." Herman tries to tell Mister what he means, but Mister can only see dollars signs in cars. Finally, "choking on the knowledge of some awful truth he could not say," Herman cries out, "Goddam cars are measuring *me*! Me! Don't you see we're on the wrong end? . . . If there's any measuring to be done," he says, "I'll do it" (C, pp. 49-50).

Despite his protestations, Herman still measures himself by the car. "Herman," Crews writes, "had always felt himself special, felt himself being saved by a force bigger than himself and outside himself, saved to do some fantastic and special thing that would set him apart from other men" (C, p. 47). His pride drives him to eat the car and keeps him, for some time, from realizing what he has done to himself. His father's Davidic cry — "My son! My son! You always wanted to be somebody. God help you, now you are" (C, p. 31)—shows the distance Herman's pride has put between him and his fellowmen. It has turned him, like Absalom, against his father's desires. Further, it has turned him into a literal freak, the main attraction at Homer Edge's circus.

Herman is the epitome of the way the car's appeal transforms us. But throughout the novel Crews provides other examples of the automobile's power of metamorphosis. The cars' names — Cougars, Furies, and Sting Rays — convince Easy, as

he hears on the highway "their oversized engines whining and snarling, challenging for the right to break out of the pack" (C, p. 18), that they are dangerous. And their danger is expressed vividly at the crash scene to which Junell goes to get her wreck. In one of the demolished cars emergency workers hear a scream they first think is that of a dog. Later, however, they learn that "the scream belonged to a six-year-old girl. Or what had once been a six-year-old. She was wedged onto the floor in front of the back seat with the stick shift from the Barracuda stuck through her pelvis. Her legs doubled back under her. One of her arms was torn off at the elbow. She was a lump of blood that screamed" (C, pp. 42-43). Of course, we all know the ugly truth of such transformation, but most of us, like Herman's brother and Herman himself, do not think our love for the car will bring us to that end, to love's other end. Certainly, Herman does not think such an end will be his when he decides to eat what he loves. Like many of us, he sees the car as the satisfaction and the fulfillment of his desire for power, eminence, and selfhood.

Herman's desire is simultaneously religious and sexual, concerned with the very foundations of being. In the novel's first sexual scene Crews merges sex and religion by making the sexual activities of Joe and Junell almost as ritualized as a religious ceremony. The two lovers meet only at wrecks. In the back seat of his cruiser Joe begins "as he always [does], with a confession of love." He takes off "his wide-brimmed highway patrol hat" and puts it on the front seat, unzips Junell's leather jacket, exposes her breasts, sucks them, then says, as he always does, "I respect you for this" (C, p. 41). Having satisfied his most pressing needs and the amenities, Joe is "content to lie between her breasts" and do what Junell loves, talk to her about his patrol cruiser.

A car, though, is more than just a place for sex. Because it is an instrument of transformation, it can itself express sex. Anyone who recalls the grill of the Edsel will recognize how the car might be seen as female. Crews suggests that a car's engine may also be feminine when he describes how Easy, "with the gentleness of a lover . . . had stuck his hands into [the car's] dark greasy mysteries" (C, p. 15). Cynthia Golomb Dettlebach, in her book *In the Driver's Seat*, points out that the car can also be masculine. She says Rachel in Thomas Pynchon's *V* "makes sexual overtures to her car; she 'caresses,' 'fondles,' and 'touches' its phallic protuberances (hood, front bumper, gear shift)."<sup>5</sup> Junell's desire to hear Joe talk about his car is another example of the car as the male sexual organ. Perhaps the most literal use of the car as phallus appears in Crews's novel when Margo, the hotel whore, tells Herman how, a year ago, the fullback of the football team had taken her out in his white Corvette, dragged her "on top of that Vette and drove [her] like a truck" (C, p. 54). Later she explains to Herman that the fullback "didn't get me, the Vette did" (C, p. 56).

It is crucial in *Car* that Margo's Vette is a literal phallus, for the red Maverick Herman eats is the literal body, and no symbol, of the god he loves. The physical body, especially its process of eating, digesting, and excreting, is the novel's controlling metaphor. That process embodies religious and sexual expressions of human love at elemental levels; it also reveals both ends of Herman's love: his expectations and their possible consequences. Like the practitioner of theophagy,<sup>6</sup> Herman

believes that in eating the car he will assimilate its divine qualities and be, like it, immortal. But his experience after eating the first half-pound of the Maverick suggests that the consequences of his desire may be different from his hopes. "Taken to his room to lie on his back and wonder at the magnificence of what he had done," Herman feels "at one with himself and the world" (C, p. 73). His peace and self-satisfaction, however, are soon broken by a terrifying and sleepless dream in which he has gained immortality as a car. He realizes this immortality lies in the junkyards of America where he can replace any part of him "until he was not even what he was when he started. Replace everything with all things until he was nobody because he was everybody" (C, pp. 74-75). The horror of Herman's dream is, of course, its prophecy of nothingness, of no escape from his fear of being nobody. Fortunately, Margo is there to make Herman's dream vanish. She strips, lies beside him, and licks his chest, much as he, in anticipation of eating the Maverick, had lapped its red metal hood with his "pink lolling tongue."

Soothed by Margo, Herman is able to perform the other end of his act — the passing of the Maverick. Always the sharp businessman, Homer Edge knows the American public's taste for the intimate, potentially embarrassing, and perhaps obscene, exposure of oneself. So there are two shows: in the evening Herman eats and in the morning he passes. To keep the show tasteful, Edge has constructed a throne on which Herman performs. A drape hides his body, but the audience can see the piece of Maverick drop into the pan. Herman's first passing is a marvel of American showmanship. He is led in "like a prize," wearing only white shorts with a flap in the rear of them. After a thorough and painful examination by some Japanese, who represent an oriental television company, to make certain Herman isn't hiding any secrets, Herman climbs atop his throne. The audience waits breathlessly. Herman strains; then, "ping." The audience goes wild; a man in the front row jumps up and offers five thousand dollars for that first piece of car Herman excretes. After a spirited bidding war between the Japanese and Americans, the little piece of historical metal is finally sold to an American who "would pay whatever it cost" (C, p. 116) to keep it from falling into foreign hands.

With the completion of the first show's two acts nearly everyone is happy. Herman has become somebody, a star. Homer Edge and Mister believe they have a long-running and lucrative hit because it will take Herman at least ten years to eat and pass the whole Maverick. Margo loves him because he doesn't just drive a sexy car, he eats one. Even Junell and Joe are able "to go all the way" for the first time in the back seat of the Maverick, bringing themselves to climax as they talk about how Herman will eat the car. Only Herman's daddy, Easy Mack, finds in Herman's eating of the car, as he did in Herman's CAR DISPLAY, no joy nor love.

Easy had always had an "easy" relationship with the car, and he cannot understand why his sons must use the car to try to satisfy their fanatical need to be other than they are. Why can't they, he wonders, simply love and honor the car as he does? In a telling sentence Crews describes Easy's horror at discovering there is something "abnormal" about Herman's love of cars. "It was like finding out," Crews writes, "that your son liked to hang around public restrooms smelling the



toilets, or that he was secretly eating shit" (C, pp. 28-29). Thus, when Herman first eats the car, Easy envisions himself taking excrement into his own mouth, and, unable to stomach such obscenity, he vomits.

That night, while Herman has his terrifying dream of being a car, Easy is further disconcerted when he goes with Mister to take delivery of the Cadillac. The measure of everything, the Cadillac, is the car Easy has always wanted but could never afford. He is awed by being face to face with this pristine car, so new that, as the salesman tells Easy, "nobody's ever farted on her seatcovers" (C, p. 85). They circle the car "almost warily. As though they half-expected it to speak or cast a spell. The salesman open[s] his mouth and in a quiet religious voice" describes its wondrous powers: "power seats and power door locks and power brakes and power steering and power windows" (C, p. 86). "Power was everywhere" (C, p. 87). While they are driving the car, Easy is overcome by the thought of having to eat a Cadillac and has to stop so he can vomit again. When he returns to the car, however, Easy hears something that gladdens his heart. This brand-new standard of excellence squeaks. The car is not all-powerful after all, for Easy knows that

what a squeak in a car required was a *man*. A man who was a mechanic. A man who controlled and understood the car. Understood its weaknesses. Its flaws. But God in heaven! He had opened up that Cadillac car and looked behind the instrument panel, and he had felt his own mortality in a way that he had never felt it before. Such a maze of wiring . . . and fuses of every sort! God Himself would have been amazed and confounded before such a thing. (C, p. 100)

Being less than a god, Easy is not only amazed and confounded by the squeak, he is also left in impotent outrage, for he can neither find nor fix it. Soul-sick, Easy will not stay for Herman's passing of the Maverick. He retreats to Auto-Town, shuts himself away, and refuses to talk to anyone.

Although his daddy's behavior worries him, Herman doesn't let it keep him from his daily performances. Each day he continues to eat and pass, and each day, before he performs, Margo comes to Herman and comforts him. During these times together "they would talk and talk, telling each other the most intimate things about their lives: what they had hoped, done, believed, and loved" (C, p. 117). Once, when Herman's pain is great, he tells her about Myrtle, his first and only girlfriend. Herman's story is sentimental in its pathos,<sup>7</sup> yet the experience it describes is significant in its effect on Herman. When he was seven and Myrtle was five, they would meet under a mountain of junked cars in the center of Auto-Town. Herman had marked out tunnels for each of them to follow to their meeting place, a "rotted and old" Rolls-Royce. Inside that car they played grown-up. One day, however, Myrtle didn't come to play. Three days later he learned Myrtle was missing. Finally she was found under a car, and when they brought her out, she had been smashed so badly that, as Herman says, "you couldn't even tell what it was they brought out of there" (C, p. 120). Myrtle's end is no different from that of the six-year-old in the Barracuda. Both have been transmuted to the

unrecognizable, to nothing. Stunned by the loss of his loved one and in fear of his own mortality, Herman withdraws. He tells no one about his play with Myrtle until he tells Margo. He refuses to love anything or anyone that he believes can suffer such utter transformation. He retreats into his head and dreams of becoming a car, godlike in his immortality and completeness.

When Herman first eats the car, he dreams he has become it and gained immortality. He can escape his own death, he believes, "because he was the thing that threatened him, and he would not commit suicide" (C, p. 74). But if he is a car, he is, ironically, committing suicide in eating the car. Reducing himself to both the eater and the eaten, Herman finds that the more he eats of the car, the more he suffers. "Herman *hurt*," Crews writes, "in a long devious line starting at his mouth and running down his throat through several long curling intestines and ending in his anus" (C, p. 113). Indeed, Herman has become an agent of transforming power, but he has not become a car. He has turned himself instead into an alimentary canal, whose life, such as it is, is spent, like Herman's, in "eating and passing, passing and eating" (C, p. 114).

By withdrawing into himself and becoming an alimentary canal, Herman also achieves an illusion of completeness. Feeding on himself, he seems to be an uroboros, the serpent eating its tail, what Andrew Lytle has called "one of the oldest symbols, and out of it comes the only perfect figure, the circle."<sup>8</sup> The problem with Herman's figure of perfection and completeness is that it is self-destructive. The little pieces of metal Herman swallows provide, like excrement, no nutrients to his body. His pride in desiring to be different from other men fuels Herman's hunger but cannot satisfy, because it is never more than need itself. When his pain grows too great, Herman refuses to eat any more of the Maverick, because, as he says, "it's poisoning me. It's poisoning me with pain" (C, p. 124). Herman now recognizes what he only sensed when he saw the cars dropping from the expressway above Auto-Town. He has chosen the wrong end of love. His father's suspicions were right. He has been eating excrement, poisoning himself with his pride. Herman's vision now clears. he recognizes that he loves the living, loves Margo, and will not commit suicide.

When Herman decides to quit, Margo also stops performing as the hotel prostitute for Homer Edge. In the scene when Margo takes Herman to her room after they have both quit, Crews makes clear that Margo's whoredom is like Herman's love of the car. Like the ballroom in which Herman performed, Margo's room is filled with the tools of her trade, and the sight of it staggers Herman's imagination. He cannot conceive why anyone would be a whore, especially Margo. Margo explains that all this — the room, her whoredom — "is the other end of a long line I got into a long time ago" (C, p. 141). Like Herman, Margo recognizes that she has chosen the wrong end of love, an end that could never satisfy nor fulfill but only poison.

The extent of such poisoning love is seen also in the desperate response the others have to Herman's refusal to continue his performances. Mister and Edge, Junell and Joe, have sought the fulfillment of all their desires in Herman's act. For them, the car must be eaten or "they would be bankrupt and broke" (C,

p. 125). The contract with ABC Television is good only if the whole Maverick is devoured. Junell and Joe think themselves able to reach sexual climax only in that slowly vanishing car and cannot think what seems to them the unthinkable. The Maverick, then, must be eaten. All of them are willing to eat the car, but only Mister, because of his physical appearance, can double as the eater and the passer of the car. His efforts are valiant but futile. Mister cannot eat the car because he does not love it. He only loves the status he believes the car can give him. So desperate is Mister for his status that he does eat and pass the car, but only once. These two performances nearly kill him, and, in the end, their dreams come to nothing, come to agony and despair.

Easy Mack's dream that the car will save them all turns, as well, into a dead end. After Mister's disastrous passing of the car, Herman takes Margo to Auto-Town to show her the meeting place of his first love, an act which suggests that Herman is now willing to accept what he could not before, the vulnerability of human love and life. Walking across the desolation that is Auto-Town, they see Easy Mack picking his way over the mountain of "broken and mutilated" bodies of dead cars toward the car crusher, and they watch him climb into it. Later, as Herman and Margo sit in the ancient and ruined Rolls-Royce, "the dust they had raised from the seats" settling "onto their faces, their arms, their laps, the tops of their shoes" (C, pp. 151-52), they hear "the car crusher shut on itself." Easy has chosen the only end his love of the car allows.

The final scene of the novel reverberates with significant undertones. The Rolls-Royce, the scene of first love, like the ruined garden of man's first love, is restored by Herman's and Margo's love for each other. The dust that lightly coats the lovers is the emblem of human life, its humble beginning and end. And the sound of the car crusher reminds us all that the end of our pride, our love of ourselves — whether it takes the form of loving cars, status, sex, or money — is self-destructive, is nothing. In *Car* Harry Crews shows with an almost Swiftian manner and force that the worship of a car or any other double man makes of himself can only result in death, the other end of love.

## 11. Harry Crews: An Interview\*

David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble

QUESTION: When do you write? when you have a story? or every day?

CREWS: I write every day of my life.

QUESTION: How many hours a day?

CREWS: I can work about three hours, sometimes four, on first-written stuff; you know, the page is blank, and you're trying to kind of find out which way you're going.

QUESTION: Do you write at home or at your office?

CREWS: My office.

QUESTION: Do you look forward to it? Is it fun for you to write?

CREWS: No. There are times when things are really going well and you know where you are and you know what you're doing; you have a sense that you know what it means. Those times are pretty good. But the real satisfaction is when you get it done and say, "Before me, this was not; because of me, this is." That's a little like (how's it go in the Bible?), "Before Abraham was, I am." I suspect that's why people have told stories from the beginning.

See, you don't want to go there. You say, "I don't know what to write! I don't know the next paragraph!" The Hemingway thing—always stop when you can write another five hundred words—well, that's real nice advice, if you can follow it. But sometimes, you know, you can't follow it. So you say to yourself, "I can't write today because I don't know anything." Then you say back to yourself: "I'll tell you what you do; you go there and you put it in the chair. You get to the chair and you just stay there three hours. And you can't write letters, and you can't clean your fingernails, and you can't pick your teeth or anything else. You just sit there. You don't have a window to look out. You look at the wall. And then in

---

\*Parts of this interview first appeared in the *Southern Quarterly* 19 (Winter, 1981): 65-69 and appear here with that journal's permission.

three hours, get up, and you're cool. You've done your best." Well, three hours is a long time. After about twenty minutes you'll say, "Hell, do *something*, if it's wrong."

I'll tell you something else. When I start writing, I say to God, "God, give me five hundred words. I don't want to be greedy, although I am at times a very greedy person; but I'm not greedy today. Give me five hundred words and I'll be satisfied. I don't want to know the whole rest of the book. All I want to know is the next five hundred words. Thank you. Amen." And then, do it. Five hundred words, after all, isn't much. If you double-space and you've got good margins so you can make notes to yourself, you're only writing 250 words a page. That's two pages. And, as the young Jules Verne said to the somewhat older Alexandre Dumas, "How do you write so much? How do you turn so much out?" Dumas said: "A page a day gives a book a year. Two pages a day gives two books a year." Now, that's going to sound very mechanical, very arbitrary, but that's the way I do it. That's the way I think. Many times those two pages go somewhere else, usually the trash basket or the furnace. Andrew Lytle used to say, "Fire is a great refiner." And it is.

QUESTION: Do you know when you start them how your novels are going to end?

CREWS: Never.

QUESTION: The ending is decided as you move along in the writing?

CREWS: I move toward where the story seems to be going. You don't make up a story; you discover a story. Robert Penn Warren says a writer does not need to know his story; he only needs to trust his knowledge of craft and technique to discover the story. And the bottom line is what Flannery O'Connor said: you never do really discover it. She said that no matter what the subject, the writer is interested in the mystery of that subject, which he cannot hope to solve but only to deepen. Ain't that *fine*? That's *fine*! That's fine. And you can't do it much better than that.

Many times you start a novel or a short story or whatever from the wrong point of view. You don't know that then, but as you move it becomes clearer and clearer. *A Feast of Snakes* was about five times as long as it is now. I wrote it all the way to the end, and I saw that I had done it wrong. I'd put it together wrong. So then I just had to go back and do it again. In *Naked in Garden Hills* the first line I ever wrote was, "Wherever he was, he looked as though he had been there forever," I was talking about Fat Man—Mayhugh. That line is still in the book, but it's deep in the book now.

QUESTION: When you've written a book all the way to the end, do you put it aside for a while or not?

CREWS: Once I start with a thing, I like to keep in touch with it. I like to keep on with it. When I've got some words on the page, when I'm rewriting, I can write eighteen hours a day. That's rare, when I work like that; but once I start writing, I don't want to turn it loose.

QUESTION: Do you do a lot of revising? Do you rewrite, or do you tinker with what you've written?

CREWS: I think of changing a word or transposing words, deleting a line; I think of that as polishing, not rewriting. I think of rewriting as touching a book structurally; when you say: "This thing's in the wrong place. I don't know where it goes; maybe it doesn't go anywhere; but it doesn't belong here." So you move it. You change the structure. That's rewriting. I do rewrite a great deal.

QUESTION: How do you feel when you sit down to start something new?

CREWS: The fear that I think many writers live with (maybe even *all* of them; certainly, I do), the fear that I live with is that I won't ever be able to do it again. I mean *anything*—a novel, a story, a thing like *A Childhood*. This is not false modesty. When I sit down to write, I sit down with an absolute terror that it's not going to work. I also think that in every book you write, in the middle of the thing it looks like it's not going to work. Because most of the time, as I said, you don't know where you're going. Mr. Lytle, who took me in like a lost dog and was as much a father to me as any man, except for my Uncle Alton, ever was, told me: "Son, the middle of a place, the middle of a thing is no place to judge it from. Suck it up and go on." Well, I'm sure Mr. Lytle never said, "Suck it up." He's a very formal man and a gentleman. I told him, "We both say we're Southerners, but you're a Southerner, I'm not a Southerner." Like Jimmy Carter and me. We're both from the South, though; well, we ain't from the South. He's . . . ain't a tenant farmer's son; I am. I'm not bad mouthin' him or tenant farmers, I'm just stating a truth.

QUESTION: Mr. Lytle, of course, encouraged you while you were a student at the University of Florida, and you've also quoted Robert Penn Warren and Flannery O'Connor admiringly. Are there other writers you think you've learned from?

CREWS: I think I've learned more from Graham Greene than I've learned from any other writer. To the best of my knowledge, I've read everything that he's ever written. I like *The Power and the Glory* an awful lot. But, you know, there are no perfect books. Faulkner said, if I remember correctly, that he read *Madame Bovary* every year; it's a fine book, but it's not a perfect book. For starters, the beginning is very, very wrong. But I love it. I love that book, and I read it quite a bit, too. Andre Gide I read and think I've learned much from. I could go on. As everybody knows, people who write, more often than not, are voracious readers. If I get caught in a house where there are no books, I go nuts.

QUESTION: Do you read Faulkner much?

CREWS: I've read him all, but I never read him when I'm writing. There are a lot of writers I don't read when I'm writing. I think Thomas Wolfe was the best writer this country ever had because he took the greatest risks and made the greatest failures, but I wouldn't touch Wolfe when I was writing.

QUESTION: Any others you admire?

CREWS: James Agee: he was born a prince of the language and so he remains. Truman Capote: I don't care what kind of stupidass remarks he makes, he can

write; he really can. When he's on, he's really on. Updike would be twice the writer he is if he weren't such a hot dog. God knows, he's a word man. Eudora Welty: great writer. Erskine Caldwell, by the way, is a helluva lot better than he's ever been given credit for. Mr. Caldwell is much, much better than his peers. But if you ask me, "Who's your favorite writer?" there's no answer to that. That's like saying, "What do you like best for breakfast?" Some mornings you want a beer; some mornings you want strawberries; some mornings you want, God help us, Frostie Crispie Flakes with a lot of sugar; and some mornings you want your old lady.

QUESTION: Did you ever feel you'd outgrown a writer you'd once admired?

CREWS: My first hero in letters was Somerset Maugham. I outgrew that. When I was a freshman, I thought Ayn Rand was a hell of a writer, and unfortunately I read all of her books. By the time I was a sophomore I knew she was no good. She's a tract writer. The theme, that the English teachers love so much, comes first and the characters come later. It's something that people have said about me. They're wrong, of course. That's what's wrong with Sartre's fiction; every character has to come in bearing the burden of his peculiar, or particular, brand of existentialism. It constitutes a flaw in the work he does. To some extent James Baldwin is the same way. I think James Baldwin is one of the best essayists, if not *the* best essayist, in the country. "The Fire Next Time" is a beautiful essay, wonderful essay. I don't like his novels or his play. I think the preface to the play is marvelous. I would much rather these people write essays. That's an honorable and wonderful and difficult profession. It always seemed to me that, in the novels that Ayn Rand or Sartre write, the subject comes before the people; the subject doesn't come out of the people and their predicament in the world.

QUESTION: You don't think of your novels as novels of ideas?

CREWS: Not in that sense. People have said I write thesis novels or tract novels. That hurts. I'm not ashamed of admitting that that hurts me. Real honest-to-God pain. Because I don't believe it's fair and I don't believe it's true, and I believe it comes out of a superficial reading.

QUESTION: How so?

CREWS: Well, all books deal with subjects. Every novel will make an economic statement because the people in them have to get their bread somehow. And every novel will make a theological statement, and on and on. It all depends on the characters. Faulkner said, generally, that the characters should be so solid they cast a shadow. I think that the people in my book—I've missed a couple of times; who hasn't?—I think that most of the people in them are people, not just names clunking around imitating people. They have substance, I think. I am not, despite what I think of as the tight narrative line of my books driving towards what I at least believe is an inevitable ending, despite that, I'm not a very conscious writer. I don't say, "I've got this character here and this one here, and I'm going to do this with that and that with this."

Any character of mine is difficult for me to talk about, in the same way that anybody—any friend, any enemy, anybody I know—would be difficult for me to

talk about in any real depth, because they're complex. You know a lot more about them than you can put in a book or then you need to put in a book. I think that I talk more cogently and more succinctly and more sensibly about other writers' work than about my own, and we all know why: you're closer to it, and it is very often a mystery, a mystery that you can't solve, but a mystery that you've been involved in. To ask me to unravel that mystery and elucidate upon its parts or how it got put together is something I don't do very well.

QUESTION: You talk about other writers' work a good deal here at the university.

CREWS: I lecture to freshmen in a course called Introduction to Fiction. And then I work with graduate students who think they want to be writers. I try to do for them what a good editor would do for them, if they had a good editor. They write and I read, that's the name of the game. We do have a class and we read accomplished writers and we talk about them. We discuss the stories that the students write; every student that writes a story has a conference with me in my office.

QUESTION: What do you think about that? Do you think that works?

CREWS: I think if the student's a writer, it works; if he's not a writer, it doesn't work. If you ask me, why is a man or woman a writer, what's in there that makes him that, I have no answer. Unfortunately, most of the people that teach that stuff don't write themselves, and a lot of bad information is given to people who take such courses, because the people giving the information don't know what they're talking about, because they haven't done it. They studied with someone who didn't write.

I read their stories, and I read them very carefully, and then I talk to them: "This transition is too fast," or "You have a mechanical break here." Now, some of the best stories that we know of have mechanical breaks in them: "The Dead," Joyce's story, I think has five. There are no Thou Shalt Nots in fiction. A writer can do any damn thing he can get away with. As Flannery O'Connor said, unfortunately, he can't get away with very much. Or I'll say to the student: "Look, this language you've got here. This is rhetoric. This language doesn't do anything. It doesn't carry itself. You're in love with the sound of your own voice" (which, God knows, all of us who write, and some of us who don't, are) "but it won't do." There is a soft spot in all of us who write that's got to be killed, squashed, exorcised, before we can write truly, as Hemingway would say, God love his soul.

QUESTION: Writing the way you do, you must sometimes get stuck or blocked. What do you do if and when that happens?

CREWS: Well, I run a lot. I don't run fast when I run, but I run a long way. It takes a long time. When I run, I think about my stories, and I think about what's going wrong. I think about how things are developing. I think about things I don't know. I think about a lot of things, but it all has to do with writing. I have got unstuck running more than I ever have other ways, because it's almost self-hypnosis.

I pretend (and I pretend as soon as I hit the street), I pretend that there is a little man in my forehead who is running this machine, which is my body. I've been hurt a lot, so it hurts when I run. The machine—the legs, the neck, the back, the ribs—



sends messages up to the little man behind my forehead. It's like a ship, and a guy down in the engine room is calling up to the captain: "Ah, engine two, in trouble. Engine two, firing badly. Smoke coming out." The captain says, "Never mind. I've checked that out all right. Maintain speed." Hangs up. After a while, no matter what comes up to the little man, he sends it back. He sends it back to the foot: "Foot is all right." Foot hurts, feels as though it may be fractured again. "We've checked it out fully. Foot is maintaining well." Phone hangs up. So then, after, say, about three miles, your body goes away. I get the feeling of becoming total mind, free mind. You get a focus, a concentration that you can get nowhere else.

**QUESTION:** Despite your earlier disclaimer, we would like to ask you about your novels. Many of them seem to deal with the nature of man's evil.

**CREWS:** It is more fascinating, perhaps easier, to write about that which is diabolical and evil. We somehow feel, I think, that we understand goodness and love better than we understand badness and evil. Who would be evil? Why would you be evil? Why would you starve the Georgians in Russia? Why would you shovel people into furnaces? You can't think about that. And yet, my God, my God. . . . It is the thing in us that keeps us fascinated with ourselves. It fascinates us with ourselves much more, the animal in us, the flesh-tearing, brutal animal in us, fascinates us much more than the kissing, licking sweetheart who sends valentines, who cares enough to send the very best.

**QUESTION:** You like to end your novels in the midst of holiday crowds. Do these mob scenes reflect this sense of mankind?

**CREWS:** It has been my observation, perhaps faulty, that we live for that. We make our bread, we earn our living, we do whatever we do in some form of isolation, and it's highly controlled. We all have these facades, these images of ourselves. But if you go to, say, Fort Lauderdale Beach, that which is in us that we deny, either consciously or unconsciously, seems to emerge; and that seems to me more what we really are than what we would have people believe we are. I'm afraid I don't have a very high opinion of the disguised human being, "disguised" meaning his identity, his family, where he came from, what he believes in. When all of that disguise is gone, he then becomes a thing that none of us can be proud of or pleased with (and I think it's in all of us). You can call it a form of mass hysteria, if you want to, but, you know, good men, and I mean large numbers of good men, have done absolutely atrocious things for no other reason than that they were caught up in the frenzy of the lack of identity. And when you get caught up in that frenzy, then you revert to the cutting edge of the front teeth and the grinders in the back.

**QUESTION:** Is that why you like to use grotesques, freaks, in your work? because they don't have these disguises?

**CREWS:** Right. They have to deal with it every minute of their lives. When you're the midget with the biggest foot in the world, there's not much chance that you can hide anything; it's right out there for everybody to see.

None of this was very conscious. I told you before, I'm not a very conscious

writer. Now, there's a midget in each of the first three novels I wrote. I gave the third manuscript, third novel, to a wonderful lady I was married to, Sally, and she read it (she's a pretty good critic and reader), and she came out and had this look of anxiety and despair and puzzlement on her face. She said to me, "You don't intend to make a career out of midgets, do you?" It was the first time I realized—really, I swear to God—that I had three novels, cheek to jowl, with midgets in them. I don't know where that comes from. I don't know exactly . . . it just seems to help me do what I need to do, say what I need to say, deal with whatever preoccupations I have in the world, to have people such as these in the novels.

**QUESTION:** Another of your preoccupations, as you suggested a minute ago, is with the family. *A Childhood* is about your own family, and each of your novels deals with the families that the characters form after the break-up of their real families. Would you comment on that?

**CREWS:** It's a thing that's very much on my mind all the time, the disintegration of the family. I see it everywhere I go. I think about the marvel of growing up in the same house. I think that's a very beautiful thing, to be able to do that. And I think it's a very beautiful thing to have your momma and daddy and your brothers and sisters there. You know, you write out of the manners of your people and the customs of your people, and that is all you've got.

But we're all so mobile; we're all so . . . voiceless is a real good word, used in that context, because accents have almost disappeared. You can take a disc jockey from Gainesville and take him to Los Angeles and nobody would ever know the difference. They've all got that banana-smooth sameness. When we lose our voices, there's no communicating. When we lose that, then we begin to lose the family. You know, damned little was passed on to any of us—voice, place, manners, customs. When that begins to break down, it diminishes the human family. That's what I think.

**QUESTION:** Your novels comment, too, on the American preoccupation with the consumer economy, our propensity to devour, to gorge it all in. Do you think of yourself as a social critic, a social satirist?

**CREWS:** Well, I've certainly never thought of myself as anything like, say, Sinclair Lewis, but I think that any writer that writes about anybody living in any culture is going to be to some extent a commentator on that culture and on that system. Maybe because of how I was raised and where I was raised, I just don't care much about clothes and about food. If a man's got a place where he won't freeze to death when he puts his head down to go to sleep and if he's got enough to eat, well then he's pretty much all right. When I lived out on the lake in Melrose, there was not a bed in the house. I slept on the floor. I wrote *The Gypsy's Curse* sitting on two concrete blocks at a desk made out of a door. You know, if everything has to be plastic and polyester color-coordinated, that kind of world, it makes me nervous. I don't like it and I don't want anything to do with it. Such circumstances would diminish whatever intellect or perception of feeling I have about my fellow man. To pile up all that stuff is an effort to resist that fact that

someday you're going to lie down and die. I just know that's the way that works. I don't think that *not* piling it up is going to keep you from doing it, but it just seems to me that you can spend your time in a better way.

QUESTION: Earlier, you mentioned your prayer to God, *A Childhood* has a remarkable scene dealing with your religious conversion, and your novels often take as their protagonists or contain minor characters who are men of God or religious fanatics. Would you talk about your view of religion?

CREWS: I have no book that does not in some way concern itself with man's relationship to God. That's my own judgment. Somebody else can say something else. But I am a believer. I am not a spark of electricity. I am not an accident. I was made. Natural law is a phenomenon that never ceases to amaze me. I have in *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* that if you take a rock and contemplate it long enough and concentrate on it, touch it with your tongue, and look at it, that the whole mystery of the world is in it. Strangely enough, they all, if you turn 'em loose, they all fall down. They don't go up or sideways, anything else. Peanuts put their flowers on the top of the ground and their fruit underneath the earth. I don't believe, although I've tried to understand it, I don't believe that we really know why sap rises in trees; but I expect somebody could give me a long documented thing on that . . . I've read them, and I still don't believe they know.

But I go to no church. I am not of any denomination. I think of worship, if you want to use that word, or I think of thinking about God as contemplating the inadequacies of my own heart. But churches, organized religion—I have tried, I've been to just about every church you can think of. Catholic churches: the great T. S. Eliot said, if God is to be worshiped, He ought to be worshiped with all possible pomp and circumstance. The icons, the water, and the gettin' down and gettin' up, and the wafer and the wine. But a little later it all goes sour. So I can't be a Catholic. I can't be a Baptist and I can't be a Unitarian. The Unitarians, God love their hearts and souls and may they all be right, they talk about things like the cavities in your teeth. If you've never been to a Unitarian fellowship, you ought to go; guys in there talking about Watergate; which is all right. I went for a while over here to the temple—not Orthodox, not Reform, Conservative Judaism, I think it's called Conservative Temple. I think there's three of them. That guy gave a talk on, a lecture on Abraham Lincoln. You think I'm lying? My right hand to God. He gave a lecture on Abraham Lincoln. At one point I'm standing there and I don't know anything about it and I've got my yarmulke on and I'm kinda watching everybody else and some of it's in English and some of it's in Hebrew. Anyway, all of a sudden, I'm standing there, first time I went—later on, I know what it means, but I'm with nobody—and all of a sudden they all turn around, this way. . . .

QUESTION: They're all looking at you, right?

CREWS: Yeh. Well, I'm a slower learner, but—used charitably to be called a late developer—but I got myself around too, and it turns out we're looking toward the Wailing Wall.

So anyway, I can't go to church. I can't go to church.

QUESTION: Organized religion is clearly not something that holds any. . . .

CREWS: No, because there's too many . . . things in there; just as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "You'll have to pardon me if I cannot believe your fairy tales." I think that's the way he said it. In any event, he was not an atheist; he was an agnostic, but he was clearly a moral and a good man. I am not an atheist or an agnostic, I sometimes act and say things that would lead people to believe it, things that clearly would indicate such a theological position. Not true. On the other hand, it is a thing with which I'm fascinated, and, to be pompous, a thing with which I flagellate myself more than a little. And if I was in one of those monasteries where the monks slept in their coffins, I'd be right in there sleeping. But I don't have to sleep in my coffin. Some of us know the ground we're going into, and some of us have already smelled our rotting flesh, and some of us have already had the worms in our eyes, and the rest of it, so, after you've had that, well, you don't need to go to church; you've already been, and got everything they've got to give you. All you've got to do is wait and see how it turns out. And I for one find the fact that every mother's son and daughter of us is gonna die, I find that one of the most beautiful and terrifying and surely informative things that will ever happen to us, 'cause we gonna get to find out. We gonna get to find out.

I've always thought a writer has an obligation to show the skull. This is not original with me. I think Flannery O'Connor may have said it—that if you don't show the skull behind the smile, then you haven't shown it all. That's related, it seems to me, to what Hemingway said—that all stories end in death and that him that would keep you from that is no true storyteller. When I'm writing, I want the novel to be terrifying and beautiful and joyful and full of anguish and laughter at the same time, so that you're thinking, "My God, my God, what are we in here?" Now, why do I want to do that? I don't know. It's just part of who I am. I can't explain it to you. It's just the way it comes out.

QUESTION: Are you surprised when people find your books funny?

CREWS: No. They're funny books. I never set out to be funny. I've never thought of myself as a funny person. Not many people *laugh* when I'm around. I walk into the bank and all the guards put their hands on their guns. It's just that that terror and anxiety that we all live with is as necessary and real and important as the joy and the beauty that we live with. And there wouldn't be any joy and beauty and ecstasy and all the rest of it, if there weren't at the end of the road the worms for your eyes. There wouldn't be.

QUESTION: We read your novels. We've been reading them for a long time. Do they sell?

CREWS: They don't sell very well.

QUESTION: Well, I'm curious about that.

CREWS: I am, too.

QUESTION: Do you have any theories, any notions about why not? and how do you feel about that?

CREWS: I feel bad. I feel bad about that. Because anybody that tells me he doesn't lust for an audience, I think he's crazy.

You may or may not know that this has been said, and you may or may not agree with this, but the audience for fiction in America is suburban and middle class. Suburban housewives, around thirty-five or six or seven. That's who buys the books. Now, are they gonna buy a book with a guy walking on his hands, hitting a lady in the head with a hatchet [*The Gypsy's Curse*]? They gonna buy a book with a guy in it that's got the biggest foot in the world, and he himself is a midget [*The Gospel Singer*]? Practically everybody that's written anything about me maintains that I put that stuff in those books—midget with the biggest foot in the world; guy who walks on his hands, can't talk, can't hear, and the story's told from his point of view, which is a goddam triumph—they say I put that stuff in there to sell books. Well, if they knew anything about selling books, they'd know that wouldn't sell books. I don't *put* anything in my books anyway. Middle-aged women don't buy those books, and middle-aged men don't buy them. That criticism hurts me.

QUESTION: Have you ever sold any of your novels to the movies?

CREWS: All my books are or have been under option for movies. One of them's sold outright, *The Gospel Singer*. People ask me things like: "Won't you feel bad if they make your book into a movie? You know, the producer does something, the director does something, the actor does something, everybody's screwin' with it. . . ." I say: "No. They haven't done *anything* to my book. My book's in the library. Nobody's touched my book. That's what *they* did."

QUESTION: Do you read reviews of your work?

CREWS: I sometimes read the first lines of reviews. Then I quit.

QUESTION: You mean if the first line isn't good you hate the review?

CREWS: Well, I'm not quite that tender, I don't think. But maybe I am. I can get hurt really quickly and really deeply emotionally, and it hurts for a long time. Nobody needs that. You don't need that very much.

Geoffrey Wolff reviewed one of my books, a two-page review, but, you know, he's gotta start out by saying, "Harry Crews has written eight novels, four of which I have read, one of which I have liked, but if you have come here for me to knock Crews, you've come to the wrong place." And then from then on, all roses, which I didn't read. I'm not gonna listen to somebody tell me he's read four of my books and liked one out of eight of them, and now he's gonna give me a good review. I just don't need that. It's probably true. Maybe they're all bad. Hell, I don't know. Let somebody else decide. I just write 'em. I don't review 'em. I don't ever recall reviewing a book of mine. Well, not in public.

QUESTION: Well, I've reviewed them, too, and I don't think they're bad; but you're not exactly getting rich from them, are you?

CREWS: If I wanted to make money writing, or if I wanted my son to make money writing, I sure as hell wouldn't tell him to become a novelist. Not that you can't make money being a novelist, but it's rare that you can make money being a

novelist and make it honestly. You gotta be a fraud, a cheat, a hypocrite. You gotta study the market, what's *in* this year, and go do one of those. I never do that. I write what I write. I write what comes to me.

QUESTION: Are you bitter about reviewers? Do you really care about that?

CREWS: I've stopped reading them.

QUESTION: You've gotten a lot of good reviews.

CREWS: Yeh, well, that's nice to know, but it doesn't help very much.

QUESTION: Reviews don't sell books.

CREWS: Nope.

QUESTION: What does?

CREWS: I don't know. I got a kind of theory about it. "Theory," that's sweet. I got a feeling about it. It's that I go down and buy a book and read it, and then I meet you at the post office. I say: "Hey. Richard Price's *Ladies' Man* that just came out. Get it. It may upset you a lot, but it's a helluva book. You oughta get it, and they've got two left down there. If I was you, I wouldn't mail that letter. I'd go get it right now." And then you go get both of them and you send one to Iowa. And then somebody in Iowa says, "Hey. This is not bad." Like that.

QUESTION: And then he goes to the post office. . . .

CREWS: Yeh. I think that must be the way it happens. If it doesn't happen that way, then maybe some of us just weren't meant to be. . . . See, the ultimate criticism, and it's a killer, it *is* a killer, the ultimate criticism that a writer gets is that what he is, is not worth being. I mean, after all the work is in. Maybe by that time you're dead; hopefully, you're dead.

QUESTION: I asked Truman Capote that question about reviews, and he said that reviews were of no use unless they were so orchestrated that they came out within about one week. He said if you could get the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* and *Time* and *Harper's* and the *New York Review of Books* all to come out with the same thing in about ten days or two weeks, this would create a kind of effect.

CREWS: Well, if nothing else, people'd be talking about it.

QUESTION: Yeh, it'd be all over New York. But if the reviews come out slowly, one at a time all over the place, then no one review does anything for you. You get raves but they don't have any effect.

CREWS: So much of it's luck. Eudora Welty said you don't just need talent and hard work and the rest of it. To write a good book or a good story you also need luck. And I think most writers would agree with that.

QUESTION: I've also heard that something like forty percent of all hardcover novels are sold within the city of New York. That can't help you.

CREWS: The way I get it is "within an eight-hundred-mile radius of New York City." But it could be "within New York City." That's true. Whatever reputation

I have does pretty much exist, strangely enough, within the urban North. There is none down here, much.

When *Esquire* asked me to write a column for them every month, I didn't much want to do it because I knew it was going to get in my way. And I didn't start just to be a columnist. But, I told 'em I'd do it for a year. I wrote as well as I could. I wrote things that I thought were real and of some consequence. But I also thought it might get my name around and might help my books to sell. I want my books to sell. I ain't ashamed of saying that.

QUESTION: You took the job in order to promote your name, right? Nobody else is doing it, so you've got to do it. Right?

CREWS: That's right. You got it right. And that does not speak well, I don't think, for a man to admit that.

You know, all we've got is time. I'm halfway to eighty-six, and that's getting on. I'm on the downhill side. How damn long do I expect to live? I always wanted twenty titles. I always wanted twenty titles because I thought if you did (Hell, this sounds so mechanical and arbitrary to say, "I wanted twenty titles," as though that meant anything), but, if you wrote as well as you could and as honestly as you could and with as much concentration, focus, diligence, whatever, as you could, well, then, out of twenty you might get a good one. You know, you might get a good one.

QUESTION: Douglas Day wrote that *A Feast of Snakes* reveals for the first time your "radical despair." There seems to be some of that here, in your conversation, in your personal life.

CREWS: My personal life is, and has been, as long as I can remember, a shambles. I don't live, I don't do it very well. But the one thing in the world that I can have some control over and shape and feel good about is whatever I can write.

If you look at any writers, if you really look at them, what you see is a trail of mucus and blood and guts and everything else. I think that every writer of any consequence, or a writer that tries to be of consequence and write something of merit, that it costs him an awful, awful lot. If you're married, what you give to the typewriter, you can't give to the girl. That may be all right for a year or two. It may be all right for eighteen years. But sooner or later, it's going to catch up with things. While fathers are out teaching their sons to fly-fish, you're trying to teach yourself how to do something with your craft. If you're a person of feeling, if you feel things keenly and deeply—and I don't think you can be a writer unless you feel things not just for the moment but they live in you—that costs you. I don't think you can be a writer of consequence and merit unless you have grave doubts about yourself, about what you've done and who you are and whom you've hurt. And that costs you. And so, it all costs you. What is left is what all of us are going to get, a chance to know what it's like to die.

But . . . people persist. They do what is in them to do.

## NOTES

### 1. Crews Introduces Himself

1. Harry Crews, "Why I Live Where I Live," *Florida Frenzy* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1982), pp. 7-10.
2. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the biography of a place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
3. The interview took place on December 10-11, 1978, in Gainesville, Florida, with Crews, myself, and David K. Jeffrey. Parts of it have been published in the *Southern Quarterly* and are reprinted herein, pp. 140-51.
4. Harry Crews, "Carny," *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 177.
5. Harry Crews, "Gatornationals," *Florida Frenzy*, p. 80.
6. Harry Crews, "L. L. Bean Has Your Number, America!" *Blood and Grits*, p. 27.
7. Harry Crews, "Andrew Lytle," *Rolling Stone* 367 (April 15, 1982): 58.
8. Ibid.
9. Harry Crews, "Television's Junkyard Dog," *Blood and Grits*, p. 146.
10. Interview (see note 3 above).
11. Crews, "Television's Junkyard Dog," p. 144.
12. Ibid., p. 145.
13. Ibid.
14. Harry Crews, "The Car," *Blood and Grits*, p. 97.
15. Ibid., p. 96.
16. Ibid., p. 99.
17. Crews, "Why I Live Where I Live," p. 8.
18. Harry Crews, "Teaching and Writing in the University," *Florida Frenzy*, p. 5.
19. Ibid., p. 6.
20. David K. Jeffrey and Donald Noble, "Harry Crews: An Interview," p. 146 herein.
21. Crews, "Carny," p. 166.
22. Harry Crews, "The Unfeminine Mystique," *Florida Frenzy*, p. 32.
23. Ibid., p. 33.
24. Ibid., p. 34.
25. Harry Crews, "Cockfighting: An Unfashionable View," *Florida Frenzy*, p. 36.
26. Harry Crews, "A Day at the Dogfights," *Florida Frenzy*, p. 53.
27. Ibid., p. 57.
28. Crews, "L. L. Bean," p. 28.
29. Ibid., p. 25.
30. Crews, "Carny," p. 163.
31. Crews, "A Day at the Dogfights," p. 51.
32. Harry Crews, "Running Fox," *Blood and Grits*, p. 182.



33. Harry Crews, "The Goat Day Olympics," *Florida Frenzy*, p. 88.
34. Harry Crews, "A Walk in the Country," *Blood and Grits*, p. 8.
35. Harry Crews, "The Knuckles of Saint Bronson," *Blood and Grits*, p. 108.
36. Harry Crews, "Going Down in Valdez," *Blood and Grits*, p. 72.
37. Harry Crews, "Tuesday Night with Cody, Jimbo, and a Fish of Some Proportion," *Blood and Grits*, p. 90.
38. Crews, "The Knuckles of Saint Bronson," p. 113.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., p. 118.
41. Harry Crews, "The Most Kindest Cut of All: Vasectomy," *Blood and Grits*, pp. 45-50.
42. Harry Crews, "Climbing the Tower," *Blood and Grits*, p. 211.
43. Ibid., p. 209.
44. Ibid., p. 208.
45. Ibid., p. 213.
46. Crews, "Television's Junkyard Dog," p. 138.
47. Ibid., p. 141.
48. Ibid., p. 142.
49. Ibid., p. 151.
50. Ibid.

## 2. Search for Perfection

1. Joe David Bellamy, "Harry Crews: An Interview," *Fiction International* 6/7 (1976): 84.
2. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the biography of a place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 54.
3. Bellamy, p. 84.
4. Ibid., pp. 92-93.
5. Harry Crews, *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 166-67.
6. Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 36.
7. Harry Crews, *The Gospel Singer* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 9.
8. Harry Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), p. 10.
9. Harry Crews, *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 99.
10. Harry Crews, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. 118.
11. Crews called karate "self-contained, self-justifying madness" in Anna Foata, "Interview with Harry Crews," *Recherches anglaises et américaines* 5 (1972): 222.
12. Crews, *Blood and Grits*, p. 96. The novel is also the ultimate satire on all of us as "consumers."
13. Harry Crews, *Car* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), pp. 74-75.
14. Harry Crews, *The Hawk Is Dying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 148.
15. Allen Shepherd, "Matters of Life and Death: The Novels of Harry Crews," *Critique* 20 1 (1978): 57.
16. Harry Crews, *The Gypsy's Curse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 132.
17. Harry Crews, *A Feast of Snakes* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 101.
18. Crews, *Blood and Grits*, p. 213.
19. Crews, *A Childhood*, p. 90.

## 3. Postmodern Georgia Scenes

1. V. Sterling Watson, "Arguments over an Open Wound: An Interview with Harry Crews," *Prairie Schooner* 58 (Spring, 1974): 64.
2. Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Noonday Press, 1970), p. 29.

3. "Harry Crews: An Interview," *Fiction International* 617 (1976): 84.
4. *A Childhood: the biography of a place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 93, 4 (See also Watson, p. 63.)
5. O'Connor, p. 28.
6. David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble, "Harry Crews: An Interview," p. 146 in this volume.
7. Watson, p. 64.
8. Interview (6 above); p. 142.
9. In "Getting It Together," *The Writer* 84 (June, 1971): 9, Crews acknowledges, "Place, for me, has always been that important. Until I have *place* firmly in my head, until I begin to smell it, until it lives in the ends of my fingers, a story simply will not come alive for me."
10. Watson, p. 67.
11. Frank W. Shelton, "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection," *Southern Literary Journal* 12 (Spring, 1980), 98.
12. O'Connor, pp. 28-29; Robert Beverley, *The History and Present State of Virginia*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968), p. 313; John Pendleton Kennedy, "A Word in Advance, from the Author to the Reader," *Swallow Barn*, 2nd ed. (1851), repr. ed. (New York: Hafner, 1962), pp. 8-9.
13. William Faulkner, review of *In April Once* by W. A. Percy, *Mississippi* (Nov. 10, 1920), repr. in *William Faulkner: Early Prose and Poetry*, ed. Carvel Collins (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1962), p. 71.
14. Harry Crews, *The Gospel Singer* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 52.
15. Ebenezer Cooke, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (London, 1708), repr. in *The Maryland Muse* (Annapolis, 1731), facsimile, intro. Lawrence C. Wroth (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1935), p. 17.
16. Shelton (see above, note 11) places Crews firmly in "the tradition of Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor in his use of the grotesque" (p. 97) and suggests some of the ways in which he departs from that tradition. John Seelye, touching briefly on O'Connor, relates Crews to Faulkner and Caldwell, as well as to the Southwestern humorists, as a writer "belonging to that class of folk about which Caldwell and Faulkner condescendingly write" ("Georgia Boys: The Redclay Satyrs of Erskine Caldwell and Harry Crews," *Virginia Quarterly* 56 [Autumn, 1980]: 619). Dane Smith, too, briefly notes the relationship to O'Connor ("That Appetite for Life So Ravenous," *Shenandoah* 25 [Summer, 1974]: 52).
17. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, "The Fight," in *Georgia Scenes* (1835), repr. ed. B. R. McElderry, Jr. (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957), p. 43.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
19. C. Hugh Holman, "Detached Laughter in the South," *Windows on the World: Essays on American Social Fiction* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), p. 29.
20. Holman, pp. 35-45; Louise Gossett, *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1965), pp. 16-29, 75-97; Richard Gray, *The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 112-28, 274-84. See also Shelton and Seelye, *passim*.
21. Erskine Caldwell, *Tragic Ground* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1944), p. 236; *Tobacco Road* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 83; quoted by Ralph Gelder, "A Talk with Erskine Caldwell," *Writers and Writing* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 37; *Call It Experience* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, c. 1951), p. 235.
22. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1967), p. 352.
23. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, pp. 44, 32, 162, 197.
24. Interview, p. 143.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
26. Harry Crews, *A Feast of Snakes* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), repr. ed. (New York: Ballantine, 1978), pp. 149, 158. See also *The Hawk Is Dying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 149, 150, 163.

27. *Hawk*, p. 126; Flannery O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, c. 1971), p. 149.
28. Interview, p. 148.
29. Watson, p. 68.
30. Harry Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), p. 90.
31. Interview, p. 143; Watson, p. 66.
32. Harry Crews, *The Gypsy's Curse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 31.
33. For an explanation of Crews from a sociological perspective (and for an unwittingly convincing case against such a view), see Larry W. DeBord and Gary L. Long's "Harry Crews and the American Dream" (*Southern Quarterly* 20 [Spring, 1982]: 35-53), an attempt to demonstrate that his "novels cohere around the theme of social mobility" and "describe the enduring effects of class."
34. Interview, p. 151.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 148.
36. Crews, "Getting It Together," p. 10.
37. Harry Crews, *Car* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), pp. 50-51.
38. Harry Crews, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. 155.
39. Cited in Dale White, "Harry Crews of Bacon County," *Florida West* (August 12-18, 1979), p. 16.
40. Joe David Bellamy, "Harry Crews: An Interview," *Fiction International* 6/7 (1976): 88.
41. Crews, "Getting It Together," p. 10.
42. Interview, p. 143.
43. L. S. Dembo, "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," *Contemporary Literature* 11 (Summer, 1970): 318.
44. Interview, p. 145.
45. Harry Crews, "Climbing the Tower," in *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 211.
46. Harry Crews, "A Night at the Waterfall," in *Blood and Grits*, pp. 40-41 (second ellipsis is Crews's). Cf. *A Childhood*, pp. 66-67.
47. Harry Crews, "The Car," in *Blood and Grits*, p. 96. See Bellamy, p. 88.
48. Caldwell, *Call It Experience*, p. 101.
49. Harry Crews, "Television's Junkyard Dog," *Blood and Grits*, p. 145.
50. Seelye, p. 56.
51. Holman, p. 34.
52. *Ibid.*

#### 4. Land and Ethnicity

1. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the biography of a place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 4.
2. Harry Crews, *The Gospel Singer* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 9.
3. Harry Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), p. 10.
4. Harry Crews, *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 135.
5. Harry Crews, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. 54.
6. Harry Crews, *Car* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), p. 24.
7. Harry Crews, *The Hawk Is Dying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 24.
8. Harry Crews, *The Gypsy's Curse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 31.
9. Harry Crews, *A Feast of Snakes* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), copyright page.
10. Harry Crews, *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 213.
11. One might question a number of Crews's attitudes here; for example, in his novels sex and violence are repeatedly and dangerously connected, while in the world outside his fiction they are not as invariably nor as joyously linked as they seem to be with Crews.

12. All kinds of religious echoes ring, no matter how discordantly, through this novel. At its climax, for example, the grotesque Fat Man, naked save for a loincloth, gags on a vinegar-like liquid a beautiful woman in the disco has given him. Shortly thereafter Fat Man ascends heavenward in a cage, while the gathered crowd mock-cheers him. The parallels with Christ's crucifixion seems clear, even unmistakable.

## 5. Crews's Freaks

1. Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks* (New York: Simon and Schuster, A Touchstone Edition, 1979), p. 24.
2. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the biography of a place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
6. Fiedler, p. 20.
7. V. Sterling Watson, "Arguments over an Open Wound: An Interview with Harry Crews," *Prairie Schooner* 48 (Spring, 1974): 69.
8. David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble, "Harry Crews: An Interview," *Southern Quarterly* 19 (Winter, 1981): 72. Included herein p. 145-46.
9. Harry Crews, "Carny," *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 165-67.
10. See Madison Jones, "The Impulse to Fiction," *Southern Humanities Review* 14 (Summer, 1980): 211-20.
11. Frank Shelton, "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection," *Southern Literary Journal* 12 (Spring, 1980): 97-113. Included herein, pp. 21-32.
12. Harry Crews, *The Gospel Singer* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 71.
13. Crews, "Carny," p. 166.
14. Harry Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), p. 3.
15. Harry Crews, *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 174.
16. Jeffrey and Noble, p. 76; herein, p. 149.
17. Harry Crews, *The Gypsy's Curse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 27.

## 6. Crews and the Church

1. David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble, "Harry Crews: An Interview," p. 147 of this volume. There Crews says that he has visited many churches, as well as a synagogue and a Unitarian Fellowship, but one feels that his search is not a serious, personal one. Still, the interview reveals that he is fascinated with religion.
2. Harry Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), p. 45.
3. Samuel S. Hill, Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1967), *passim*.
4. See Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery; Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier* (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1981), pp. 184-86.
5. Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religious Harvest Time* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1955; Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975), p. 223ff.
6. Harry Crews, *The Gospel Singer* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 225.
7. See also Johnson, pp. 151-52. Of less value to this study is T. Scott Miyakawa's more detailed discussion of attitudes of the various sects toward ministerial education in *Protestants and Pioneers* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 85ff.
8. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the biography of a place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 167-69.

9. Johnson, Ibid., p. 54.
10. See Miyakawa, Ibid., pp. 164-65.
11. Johnson, Ibid., p. 57.
12. Miyakawa, Ibid., p. 165.
13. Johnson, Ibid., pp. 93, 53.
14. Johnson, Ibid., p. 94.
15. Johnson, Ibid., pp. 104, 15ff.
16. Johnson, Ibid., p. 15.
17. Didymus's demand is not unlike Hawthorne's cry toward the end of *The Scarlet Letter*: "Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" However, Didymus, the character, makes the demand (and it is ambiguous) in order to martyr the Gospel Singer and thereby assure him of salvation.
18. Obviously, Didymus (which derives from the Greek, meaning double or twin) serves as the Gospel Singer's conscience and/or his alter ego, but the element of doppelganger, conscience, or alter ego is not central to this paper.
19. Study of the treatment of the black preacher in Southern fiction, especially the fiction of black writers, shows that the black preacher holds the respect of his people and of whites as well. He is very seldom the object of cynicism or of satiric treatment, as is the white preacher, who often appears fraudulent, hypocritical, and self-serving. Besides respecting him, blacks admire the black preacher as a magnificent performer; but the performance aspect does not call into question the sincerity or genuine faith of the preacher. For example, Ossie Davis, in discussing black poetry at a conference in 1980 has suggested that much of the music, the rhythm, of black poetry may come from the pulpit and that black seminaries probably teach developing ministers to "sing" their sermons.
20. Jeffrey-Noble, Ibid., p. 148.

## 7. The Athlete's Hand

1. Harry Crews, *The Gospel Singer* (New York: William Morrow, 1968).
2. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 26.
3. See *The Gospel Singer*, p. 102; *The Gypsy's Curse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 175; *A Feast of Snakes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 173; *A Childhood: the biography of a place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 126.
4. Jose Ortega y. Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1957), p. 157.
5. Becker, p. 89.
6. Harry Crews, *Naked in Garden Hills* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), p. 115.
7. Harry Crews, *Car* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), p. 72.
8. Ibid., p. 27.
9. Crews, *The Gypsy's Curse*, p. 131.
10. Ibid., p. 135.
11. Harry Crews, "A Night at the Waterfall," *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 44.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.,
14. Crews, *A Feast of Snakes*, p. 64.
15. Allen Shepherd, "Matters of Life and Death," *Critique* 20 (September, 1978): 59.
16. Ibid., p. 60.
17. Becker, p. 31.
18. Ibid., p. 33.
19. Becker, p. 6.
20. Harry Crews, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), pp. 71, 95-96.

## 8. Crews's Women

1. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 39-40.
2. Ibid., p. 51.
3. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 172.
4. Neumann, *Origins and History*, p. 46.
5. Ibid., pp. 49-50.
6. Ibid., pp. 60-61, and n. 29, p. 61.
7. Harry Crews, *The Gospel Singer* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 88.
8. Harry Crews, *Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. 159.
9. Harry Crews, *A Feast of Snakes* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 120.
10. Neumann, *The Great Mother*, p. 170.
11. Ibid., p. 169.
12. Ibid., p. 59.
13. Neumann, *Origins and History*, p. 52.
14. Neumann, *The Great Mother*, p. 59.
15. Neumann, *Origins and History*, p. 46.
16. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. 317.
17. Harry Crews, *The Gypsy's Curse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 88.
18. Lionel Trilling, quoted by Carolyn Heilbrun, in "The Masculine Wilderness of the American Novel," *Saturday Review*, 29 Jan. 1972, p. 43.
19. Heilbrun, p. 41.
20. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 92.

## 9. Theme and Technique in Car

1. David K. Jeffrey and Donald R. Noble, "Harry Crews' An Interview." See page 149 of this volume.
2. For interviews see, in addition to Jeffrey and Noble, Anne Foata, "Interview with Harry Crews," *Recherches anglaises et américaines* 5 (1972): 207-225; V. Sterling Watson, "Arguments over an Open Wound: An Interview with Harry Crews," *Prairie Schooner* 48 (Spring, 1974): 60-74; and Joe David Bellamy, "Harry Crews: An Interview," *Fiction International* 6/7 (1976): 83-93. The only substantial essays are Allen Shepherd, "Matters of Life and Death: The Novels of Harry Crews," *Critique* 20, no. 1 (1978): 53-62; Frank W. Shelton, "Harry Crews: Man's Search for Perfection," reprinted by permission on pages 21-32 of this volume; and John Seelye, "Georgia Boys: The Redclay Satyrs of Erskine Caldwell and Harry Crews," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 56 (Autumn, 1980): 612-26.
3. Bellamy, pp. 92-93.
4. Harry Crews, "Why I Live Where I Live," *Esquire* 94 (September, 1980); p. 46.
5. Bellamy, p. 88.
6. See Watson, p. 66, for example.
7. Harry Crews, "Getting It Together," *The Writer* 84 (June, 1971): pp. 9-11.
8. Harry Crews, *Car* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), pp. 3, 5.
9. Harry Crews, "The Car," *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 96.

## 10. The Other End of Love

1. Flannery O'Connor, *Three* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 64 and pp. 166, 167.
2. "The Car," *Blood and Grits* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 96. This essay first appeared in *Esquire*, December, 1975.
3. See Gerald D. Silk, "The Image of the Automobile in American Art," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Fall, 1980, and Winter, 1981); 613, where Oldenburg is quoted "of all the doubles man has made of himself . . . the car is the most ever present, competitive, and dangerous." See also Cynthia Golomb Dettlebach, *In the Driver's Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 109. Both Dettlebach's book and this issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, a special one on "The Automobile and American Culture," are indispensable to anyone interested in the car in American culture and literature.
4. *Car* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), p. 15.
5. Dettlebach, p. 98.
6. See A. E. Crawley, "Eating the God," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, n.d.), 5: pp. 136-39.
7. The setting of Herman's story is reminiscent of that in James Dickey's poem "Cherrylog Rod," which was first published in 1964.
8. Andrew Lytle, "The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process," in *The Hero with the Private Parts* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), p. 187.

## INDEX

Adams, Henry; *The Education of Henry Adams*, 7  
 Agee, James, 142

Baldwin, James, 143; "The Fire Next Time," 143  
 Bartram, William, 56; *Travels*, 56  
 Becker, Ernest, 100, 101, 103-104, 111  
 Bellamy, Joe David, 33  
 Beverley, Robert, 36  
 Boatwright, James, 18  
 Borges, Jorge Luis, 42  
 Burke, Kenneth, 38  
 Byrd, William II, 37

Caldwell, Erskine, 21, 37, 38, 43, 59, 79, 143; *Call It Experience*, 43; *God's Little Acre*, 48;  
*Tobacco Road*, 43; *Tragic Ground*, 37

Campbell, Joseph, 54; *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 54

Capote, Truman, 142, 150; *In Cold Blood*, 41

Carter, Jimmy, 35, 142

Cooke, Ebenezer, 36, 37; *The Sor-Weed Factor*, 36

Crews, Harry, Works.

*A Childhood*, 7, 8, 14, 16, 21, 22, 32, 34, 35, 36, 39, 42, 43-44, 46, 47, 48, 49, 55, 60, 61,  
 66, 68, 78, 83, 86, 124, 142, 146, 147

"A Day at the Dogfights", 16, 17

*A Feast of Snakes*, 16, 23, 30-31, 35, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44-45, 55, 58-59, 60, 64-65, 66, 77,  
 80, 81, 97-98, 101, 102-105, 112, 113, 115, 116-119, 120, 121, 141, 151

"Andrew Lytle", 12

"A Night at a Waterfall", 43, 102

"A Walk in the Country", 18

*Blood and Grits*, 21, 58, 67

*Car*, 14, 23, 29, 40, 55-56, 66, 76, 79, 101, 124-131, 132-139

"Carny", 11, 15-16, 17, 70, 74

"Climbing the Tower", 18-19, 31-32, 42-43, 58

"Cockfighting: An Unfashionable View", 16

"Gatornationals", 11

"Going Down in Valdez", 18



- Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit*, 13, 23, 27-28, 40, 43, 54-55, 66, 71, 76, 79, 80, 101, 106-111, 113, 114, 118, 119, 120, 122, 147
- "L. L. Bean Has Your Number, America!", 12, 17
- Naked in Garden Hills*, 13, 15, 23, 25-26, 41, 42, 51, 52, 62-63, 66, 71, 74-75, 101, 126, 141
- "Running Fox", 17
- "Television's Junkyard Dog", 12, 19-20
- "The Car", 14, 43, 127, 132
- "The Goat Day Olympics", 17-18
- The Gospel Singer*, 13, 15, 23, 24-25, 35, 36, 39, 41, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 55, 60-62, 66, 67, 71, 72-74, 79, 80-97, 100, 101, 112, 113, 114, 115, 120-121, 149
- The Gypsy's Curse*, 15, 23, 29-30, 39, 41, 42, 57-58, 63, 66, 67, 71, 76-77, 79, 80, 102, 113, 120, 121-123, 146, 149
- The Hawk is Dying*, 14, 23, 28-29, 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 56-57, 75, 79, 80
- "The Knuckles of Saint Bronson", 18
- "The Unfeminine Mystique", 16
- This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven*, 13, 23, 26-27, 29, 40, 53, 71, 75, 79
- "Tuesday Night with Cody, Jimbo, and a Fish of Some Proportion", 18
- "Why I Live Where I Live", 7, 125
- Day, Doris, 41, 53, 56; *Pillow Talk*, 53
- Day, Douglas, 151
- Dettlebach, Cynthia Golomb, 135; *In The Driver's Seat*, 135
- Dos Passos, John, 34
- Dumas, Alexandre, 141
- Eliot, T.S., 147
- Esquire*, 7, 14, 19, 31, 115
- Exley, Frederick, 102; Frank Gifford, 102
- Family Weekly*, 56
- Fulkner, William, 34, 36, 44, 55, 59, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 142, 143; *The Sound and the Fury*, 58
- Fiedler, Leslie, 23, 67, 70; *Freaks*, 23, 67, 69
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 34
- Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary*, 142
- Franklin, Benjamin, *The Authbiography*, 7
- Gide, Andre, 142
- Gossett, Louise, 37
- Gray, Richard, 37
- Greene, Graham, 66, 142; *The Power and the Glory*, 41, 142
- Harper's*, 150
- Harris, George Washington, 34, 81; "Parson John Bullen's Lizards," 81
- Heilbrun, Carolyn, 123; "The Masculine Wilderness of the American Novel," 123
- Heller, Joseph, 120; *Catch-22*, 120
- Hemingway, Ernest, 34, 140, 144, 148
- Hill, Samuel S., Jr., 80-81, 82, 83
- Holman, C. Hugh, 37, 44
- Holmes, Oliver Wendell, 148
- Hooper, Johnson Jones, 81; "The Captain Attends a Camp-Meeting," 81
- Hudson, Rock, 53, 56; *Pillow Talk*, 53

- James, Henry, 33, 54  
 Johnson, Charles A., 81, 85, 86, 87, 89  
 Jones, Madison, 79  
 Joyce, James, 99; "The Dead," 144  
 Jung, Carl Gustav, 112, 113
- Kennedy, John Pendleton, 36
- Lawrence, D.H., 14, 123  
 Lewis, Sinclair, 146  
 Longstreet, Augustus Baldwin, 37; *Georgia Scenes*, 37; "The Fight," 37  
 Lytle, Andrew, 35, 138, 141, 142
- Maugham, Somerset, 143  
 McCullers, Carson, 22  
 Melville, Herman, 53, 65; "Benito Cereno," 65; *The Confidence Man*, 53  
 Mitford, Jessica, 85  
 Miyakawa, T. Scott, 86
- Neumann, Erich, 113, 115, 118, 119; *The Great Mother*, 113, 115, 118, 119-120  
*Newsweek*, 150  
*New York Review of Books*, 150  
*New York Times*, 18, 150  
 Noyes, John Humphrey, 86
- O'Connor, Flannery, 21, 22, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 49, 79, 132, 141, 144, 148; "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," 38-39; *Wise Blood*, 132  
 Oldenburg, Claes, 135
- Percy, Walker, 10, 34  
 Percy, William A., 36  
*Playboy*, 15, 112  
*Playgirl*, 16  
 Price, Richard, 150; *Ladies' Man*, 150  
 Pynchon, Thomas, 34, 135; *V.*, 135
- Rand, Ayn, 143  
*Rolling Stone*, 12
- Sartre, Jean Paul, 143  
 Sears, Roebuck, 10, 11, 22, 68, 89  
 Seelye, John, 44  
*Sewanee Review*, 12  
 Shaw, Irwin, 102; Christian Darling, 102  
 Shepherd, Allen, 103; "Matters of Life and Death: The Novels of Harry Crews," 103  
*Sounder*, 60  
 Southwestern humorists, 34, 36-37, 79, 81  
 Styron, William, 59; *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 59
- The Art of Falconry*, 28  
*Time*, 150  
 Trilling, Lionel, 122  
 Tyson, Cicely, 60; *Sounder*, 60

Updike, John, 34, 102, 143; Rabbit Angstrum, 102

Verne, Jules, 141

Warren, Robert Penn, 34, 141

Watson, V. Sterling, 69

Welty, Eudora, 34, 143, 150

*Who's Who in Baton Twirling*, 58

Winfield, Paul, 60; *Sounder*, 60

Wolfe, Thomas, 34, 36, 47, 142

Wolff, Geoffrey, 149